

# TRKISM

## At Length **VIII**



Alena Kay  
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TREKisM  
at  
Length  
VII

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STORIES & POETRY

BY

Karen Hunter

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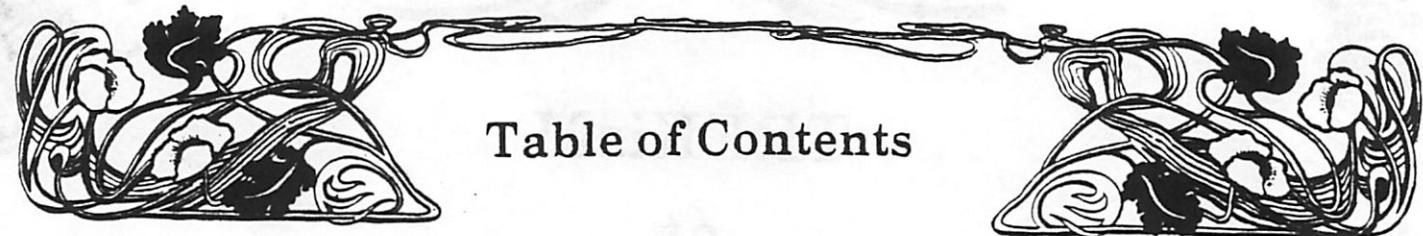
Kim Knapp

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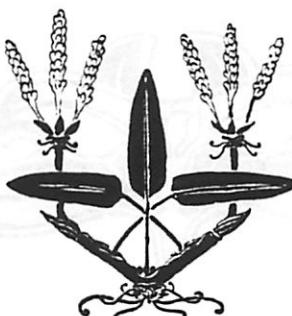


## From the Author

All my life I have been writing stories, early ones in my head and later ones on paper. My Trek stories began about one day after seeing my first episode of Star Trek: THE SQUIRE OF GOTHOS. Most of that original work has mercifully been left behind, but vestiges remain in several of the stories here. "Vulcan Woman" and "Jettison!" were begun as a direct result of Star Trek: The New Voyages. Until then I had never heard of zines and had no idea anyone would be interested in my stories. While they were doing a round of rewriting and editing (with the immense help of Trinette Kern), I managed to squeeze in some other things around two small babies and a house we were renovating. "Outbreak on Ostergard" is another story that owes its beginning to reading zines and be a part of fandom, which meant other people's stories and commentary were more often an inspiration than something internal. Having TisM come along made a big difference, too. Here I had a place to send things that were not stories, and a place to read other people's comments as well. "Challenge" was a direct result of reading Jean Lorrah's NTM stories and realizing I hadn't done a very good job of dealing with the realities of Vulcan telepathy, especially in regard to love and marriage. The filmed versions of Trek led to some more inspiration, particularly in the "What-if" category, and the filling in of missing scenes to my own satisfaction. That is the direct genesis of Teri Prohaska, along with a desire to put real people on the Enterprise, although her basic origin had little to do with that. That started out as a scene designed to get Vel to draw a picture of Kirk wearing nothing but a towel (which, by the way, failed in its objective). The poems began totally in my unconscious, since generally I dislike poetry. I wrote "Argument/Acceptance" in church one morning, scribbling all over my bulletin to the annoyance of my seat mates. It almost wrote itself, and after that it has been a bit easier to express myself that way.

Currently I have not been writing much, since working as a graduate assistant at the university gives me a lot of other writing to do. Fortunately I expect to graduate soon and move on to the next phase of my life, which I hope will hold more time for writing. The babies are teens now and the renovated house has been left behind. But no matter how things change, Trek will always stay part of my life. It's much too fascinating to ignore.

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## EDITORIAL RAMBLINGS



This one's going to be a joint rambling, as neither Kim nor Vel have had the time and/or inclination to write individual commentata. When we left off in TaL VI, Kim had a new car and Vel was moving to Florida. The Car Curse followed Vel cross-country, starting with a leaking radiator in the middle of the Arizona desert, and a carbureter that gasped and died upon arrival in Florida (maybe it was the humidity.) Both editors are now safely esconced in new homes, with incredible amounts of space to devote to Trek storage -- see addresses below for updates; note particularly Vel's, which has changed once again as of July 11, 1986 -- they've actually bought the place, so this address can be written in ink. Her husband has retired after 21 years in the Marine Corps, and they don't intend to budge for at least years and years.

Both editors have also landed new jobs -- Kim is doing word processing on a Star (which means we have our free typesetting back), and Vel is working for a print shop (but strictly offset printing, so we still have to job out our zine printing). All this means better zine production, but less time for correspondence and bookkeeping. We hope our readers understand and don't run out of patience -- we're trying, honest, but sometimes kids and careers get in the way of the really important things in life, such as zines, cons, and three-figure phone bills.

Special thanks go to several editors who have severely bent publishing etiquette to allow us to make this retrospective as comprehensive as possible. Mary Ann Drach yielded to our whining and sniveling and let us include "Officer Material," which is still in print in MAINE(LY) TREK 4 (copies of MT4 are available from Mary Ann at PO Box 485, Tempe ME 04984). "Challenge," as published by Marguerite Krause in IN A DIFFERENT REALITY 23, is also scheduled for Volume Three of NIGHT OF THE TWIN MOONS COLLECTED. NIM stands for the novel written by Jean Lorrah which introduced this universe. There is a second novel (FULL MOON RISING) and two volumes of short stories set in the same universe. For prices and any other information, SASE to Empire Books, PO Box 625, Murray KY 42071.

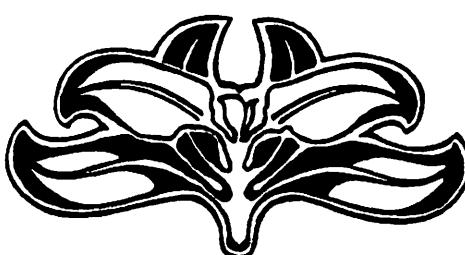
The three Vulcan legends which originally appeared in TREKisM AT LENGTH V will be included in TALES FROM THE VULCAN HEARTH, a collection of stories written by Karen. That collection was scheduled to be published by Ann Crouch, but all sorts of calamities have prevented its publication. Stay tuned for when and where the TALES will be available.

Glancing ahead to the future, TREKisM AT LENGTH VIII is guaranteed to be a doorstopper. We have more than 400 manuscript pages edited and ready to ship off to our intrepid word processor, Isabell Klein -- you'll be able to hear her wail of despair from Chicago when the first bale arrives on her doorstep -- and there is still plenty more in the re-write stage. We're sorta aiming at the turn of the year for the print date (most like post-holiday rush), but it's too soon to really make an accurate prediction.

Enjoy,

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# Academy Cadets

For the first time in his life, Jim Kirk was seriously beginning to doubt his decision to join Starfleet. His Plebe summer at the Academy had so far proved to be a disappointment. The problem was neither the academic work nor the emphasis on physical capability. Those he had planned for and worked at during his secondary school years. Nor was it the company of dozens of other cadets, all as intelligent and hardworking as he was. He had been a bit startled to be thrown into a situation where he was no longer automatically the best student, but he had learned to take that in his stride. Rather, Jim was disturbed by the unquestioning obedience demanded, when he was used to examining everything in detail, and the unvarying routine; the rules seemed inexplicable and unnecessary.

Jim was not the only one who had these doubts. Late into the night he and his friends sat up and hashed them over and over again, tired and worn as they might be from the constant activity. He knew Plebe summer was set up to weed out the misfits as quickly as possible, starting with those who were physically unfit for deep space duty. Jim accepted that readily, ignoring it as he worked. But he continued to think and wonder if he could ever accept the discipline.

The summer session was drawing to a close when a special cartography session was announced. It was to be an outing to a distant wilderness preserve. As Kirk marched to class in formation with the rest of the cadets, the Senior Cadet, Finnegan, regaled the class with details of his own choosing.

"This is just the sort of Day Care Center picnic you babies need," he informed them. "A compass and map are about all you can be trusted with, so you don't hurt yourself. You lads be careful, and maybe next week we'll let you play with the big boys."

Kirk had learned, painfully, that it was better to let Finnegan talk all he wanted. If he rose to the bait Finnegan offered, Jim knew he would get beaten again. Not only that, he had no recourse. It was Finnegan's right as Senior Cadet to harass the younger classmen. It helped not at all to know that this was considered good for discipline and as such was condoned by the officers and Academy instructors. Jim swore that someday he'd beat the tar out of Finnegan. For now he listened.

The class marched silently into the main classroom where Lieutenant Yoshi Ito waited to give the day's lecture on galactic navigation. Jim had taken some of the basic work in secondary school and was glad he had even this slight background. Ito was a very new instructor and, as a consequence, worked the cadets very hard. Now she looked over the tops of the papers she held and favored the class with a sour stare.

"The grades on these exam papers are a disgrace." She handed them to the class monitor, who proceeded to distribute them as she spoke. "Some of you fail to realize the absolute necessity of total precision and accuracy in plotting galactic courses. There is no room for error. None." Jim received his paper just then, and the appalling amount of red ink on it drew his attention. He hadn't thought he'd done so poorly. His stomach made a hard knot. "Cadet Kirk." Jim's head snapped up as Ito called on him. "Can you tell the class what were the two major errors that were made?"

He ran his eyes swiftly down his paper. "Errors in program and errors in not correcting for external orbital influences."

"That is correct. Merrick, will you tell the class the correct way to compute number one?"

Jim leaned back with a sigh of relief as Bob Merrick was put on the spot, but he paid attention all the same. It was not until the end of the class that Ito made any reference to the upcoming outing.

"I trust you have all made arrangements to be away from your quarters for the next five days. The shuttle will be at the main Academy lift pad at 0830 hours tomorrow morning. You will be there with full survival gear in a backpack, ready to lift off at 0845. Here are the preliminary workbooks for the exercise. Remember, this is not primarily a survival situation. It is an exercise in orienteering, which we hope will impress on you the necessity of accurate readings and computations. You will turn in your workbooks at the first class after you return."

There was a buzz of excitement as the workbooks were passed to the students, one to each console. The partners seated together bent their heads over the books.

"Yes, I see a question." Ito indicated a girl down the row from Kirk.

"Are we going to work with our console partners?" she asked.

"Have you any objection?"

The girl looked at her partner, who was male. He grinned up at her. "No, ma'am." She sat down rather quickly while her partner whispered earnestly at her. Kirk grinned to himself. He'd been wondering how long it would take Sondergaard and Stevens to get together. It looked like it wouldn't be long now.

Ito looked around. "If there are no further questions, the class is dismissed."

Kirk turned to his partner, Timothy Kaplan. "What do you say we get something to eat at the canteen and get to work on this workbook before supper?"

Kaplan groaned. "Have a heart, Kirk. I've got a date with McCloskie." His eyes lit up. "I've got to hurry with her. I don't think she's going to make it through Plebe summer."

Jim laughed. "All the more important to get this out of the way now and leave your evening free for more important pursuits."

"You're right. I don't want to have anything else on my mind this evening." Kaplan sighed. "Let's get to work."

They had their workbooks and papers spread out on a table in the canteen and were just finishing up when Finnegan arrived, circled in eccentric orbits by a pair of female satellites. He stopped at Kirk's table, the orbits nearly ending in collision courses. "You aren't really working on that now, are you?" He sounded amazed. "You can run that through the computer and be done with it in moments."

Kirk said slowly, holding his temper, "The point of the exercise was to give us familiarity with doing the techniques on our own. We were told not to use even a calculator." Beside him Kaplan was fuming silently. One of the satellites was McCloskie.

"You do all the work you like, Jim-boy. It isn't going to do you any good. Plebes never do anything right." Finnegan made his way to the door, his satellites re-establishing their orbits.

"I don't know how I'm going to live through another year of him," Kaplan observed after a minute. "Think we could drop him into an energy vent one of these days?"

"That's too good for him," Jim answered, straightening up his books. "When I

get back at him, I want him to know it for a long time."

"Kirk, do you think he's right -- that this assignment is really just makework, sort of to keep us occupied?"

Jim bit his lower lip, thinking. "I don't know. I'm inclined to doubt it, but there are a lot of things here I don't understand or even like much."

They started out the door, back to their own quarters. "I hope he's wrong, but either way I'm going to do as I'm told. This is a terrific job, and I'm not going to blow it by worrying about things that cannot be helped." Kaplan reached for the signal of the turbolift. "Well, see you in the morning."

"See you." Jim headed down the corridor towards his own room, his mind back on the question of what he was doing here. He hadn't come here starry-eyed, looking blissfully at the pretty spaceships the way Sondergaard had; nor had he looked only for a good job as Kaplan seemed to have done. He was a cadet because all his life he had dreamed of the Space Service and the chance to explore the way his father had done before him. Starfleet was in his family, in his blood. The stars were inviting, and his hands itched to hold the controls of a ship. Yet all the petty details of service life were becoming clear to him for the first time. He wasn't yet sure if the disadvantages of those might not be overwhelming enough to keep him from his dream.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early the next morning, Jim was waiting at the launch site as the shuttle arrived. He was the only one there to see the slim, white lines of the ship against the newly risen sun, and the gleaming white reflection made him blink.

"You are here early, Cadet," came a voice behind him. Jim swung around to see Ito coming up on a baggage cart.

"Yes, ma'am." How could he explain why it was important to him to see this one ship, alone?

Ito smiled. "Like to know what you'll be up in, I expect. Well, as long as you're here, you can give me a hand. Start carrying these containers of equipment on board. If there's time, you can go up to the cockpit and see if the pilot will let you in."

"Yes, ma'am!" Kirk was soon busy carrying containers and gear, while sneaking peeks into panels and gauges. He never even noticed that Kaplan had not made it on board. It was only when Ito called him to his place that he realized the seat beside him was empty. As he passed the slowly closing hatch, he could see Kaplan running desperately across the apron. Not even thinking about it, Jim reached out for the appropriate button to open the door.

Lieutenant Ito looked up from her clipboard in question.

"Cadet Kaplan is coming aboard, ma'am," Kirk explained as he took his seat. Everyone turned to stare at Kaplan struggling with his pack.

"You are late, Cadet," Ito said severely."

"It won't happen again, Lieutenant," Kaplan replied firmly.

"See that it doesn't." Ito turned to the pilot, and the shuttle began to taxi for the take-off.

"Where have you been?" Jim whispered under cover of the engine buildup.

"My head is killing me. That date with McCloskie was really something." Kaplan's face glowed for a moment. "But I never had such a scare as when I saw the hatch on this thing start to close. Why didn't you hold it for me?"

"Never noticed you weren't here." Kirk settled back against the increasing force of the take-off.

"Fine thing. You'd have been stuck doing the silly thing all by yourself. Or maybe get stuck with someone like Sondergaard and Stevens. They sure would have appreciated that!" Kaplan grinned, forgetting his recent scare.

"Sure they would. I'd have given them a better grade than they're going to get if they fool around." The ship leveled off at cruising speed, and Kirk turned to grin at Kaplan. Ito stood now before the group and gave them her final instructions.

"We shall be landing shortly in a wilderness area, which I shall not identify.

When we disembark, you will find yourselves in the center of a large clearing, with colored flags set at intervals around it. Each pair is to go to the properly numbered flag and await the signal. Cadet Kirk, will you hand out the compasses I showed you earlier?"

Jim made his way through the group to the box of compasses and brought them forward. Ito went on.

"When signaled, each pair is to begin walking directly away from the clearing following the compass directions set in your workbooks. As you go, you will draw in appropriate landmarks and other items such as buildings or man made structures, on the sketch map provided on page five." Kirk peered over the nearest shoulder to see a blank piece of paper. "The directions are planned to return you to this shuttle sometime in the afternoon of the fifth day. Are there any questions?"

"What if we get lost?" someone asked.

"Good point. The compasses are equipped with a small homing device. If you do not find yourself at the designated spot by 1800 hours, push the button on the homer and we will come and find you. I don't need to tell you what it will do to your mark in this course."

Kirk slipped back into his seat as Kaplan turned to him with worried eyes. "Have you ever done this before?"

"No. I've been hunting, but this isn't the same thing."

"Great. Maybe I should have missed the shuttle."

"Don't worry," Kirk said, with only a little more confidence than he really felt. "I intend to return to this spot, precisely."

"Kaplan and Kirk. If you will favor us with your attention?" Ito's voice cut across the shuttle. Jim and his partner sat up quickly and paid very strict attention until the shuttle landed, about fifteen minutes later.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was drawing towards sunset two days later when Kirk and Kaplan came up against a rather wide river, flowing gently down a curve to their left. They found themselves on a wide bluff, the wind blowing directly against their faces. Jim took a deep breath for the sheer pleasure of having reached this spot.

"This is incredible!" he exclaimed. "I haven't felt this free since reaching the Academy."

Kaplan turned left, eyes following the river downstream. "Do you think we have time to follow the next set of instructions before it gets dark?"

Kirk turned reluctantly away from the river and squatted down by Kaplan, the sketch map spread out before them. He shook his head. "Those are complex directions, designed with the river in mind to be confusing. If we try now, we're sure to get lost. Let's go swimming instead and then settle down."

"I wish I had some idea of how far along we were. It looks like we're where we should be, but these directions don't give mileage."

"Come on in the water and stop worrying." Kirk stripped off his gear and piled it against a rise in the cliff. He began to get rid of his uniform as well.

"It's too cold. You go swimming if you want. I'll get the stove started and heat up some water. Let me have your cooking stuff."

"Go ahead and take it." Kirk started scrambling down the cliff. "Lord, that is cold. Feels great, though." He plunged under quickly, swimming with a strong stroke towards the other side. Kaplan forgotten behind him, Jim battled the river current. His concerns and worries washed away in the stream, and he returned shortly to the campfire refreshed and ready to begin again.

Once darkness fell, there was little for them to do. For awhile they sat beside the campfire, lazily watching the stars come out. But neither felt it necessary to say much. They got along well enough but were not particularly good friends; this did not seem the time or the place for deep philosophical discussions. Eventually they curled up in their blankets and went to sleep, planning to start early the next morning. Neither was awake to notice the sky begin to cover with clouds.

A crash of thunder and a roaring wind awakened them just in time for the clouds

to drop a ton of water directly overhead. Jim gasped and coughed, struggling to get the precious workbooks and compass under cover.

Beside him, Kaplan stuffed the blankets and stove into his pack with haste. "The weather was supposed to be clear!" he sputtered.

"So much for modern weather science," Jim said. "Or maybe this was all part of the plan." They huddled against the overhang of the cliff, hoping to remain reasonably warm and dry.

"Now what?"

"If we're lucky, it'll clear in another hour or so."

"Ha. This feels wrong. If we were home I'd say this felt like hurricane weather."

"Then there isn't much point in waiting around here." Kirk felt for his torch and book. Sure that they were wrapped thoroughly in his raincover, he stepped out into the rain. "God, that's cold. Somehow it doesn't feel as refreshing as the cold water did last night. This is miserable."

Kaplan followed him grumbling. "All right, your turn to lead the way. Can you see where to start from here?"

"Over there. Now we head off that way until we get to the bend in the river."

Off they went, slipping and sliding in the mud formed by the torrents of rain, trying to keep their computations accurate and their workbooks dry. Kaplan was cold and starting to sneeze. Kirk had lost his left boot in the river and had angrily removed the other; his feet felt like solid ice. Fortunately, the notebook remained safe.

"It's time to head away from the river entirely," Kirk said, reading over his directions. The two looked gloomily at the woods. It seemed dark and even colder by comparison. As they looked, a loud cry interrupted them. They swung around towards the river.

"Over there!" Kirk exclaimed. "Mark our position here and come on." He dropped his gear and ran back towards the river.

As the river came to the woods and turned, a number of large boulders had come to rest. Through the mist of the rain, Kirk could see someone or something down there on the rocks. He let himself down over the edge, fighting against the spray and angry rush of the waters.

"What the hell are you doing?" Kaplan asked above him, leaning over the cliff edge.

"There's someone there. Get your rope," Kirk hollered back. "I think it's a cadet." Kaplan disappeared, and Jim made his way cautiously across to the figure on the rocks. It was Sondergaard, and she had broken her leg. Now she lay moaning, and Jim tried to comfort her. "It's all right, Kris," he said gently. "I've got you." He looked up to see Kaplan back with the rope. "Make a sling and fasten it somewhere. We've got to hurry. This river is getting deeper as I stand here."

The rope snaked down, and Kirk fastened the sling around Kris. The wind, which had lessened somewhat, suddenly began to roar again. He could not hear Kaplan and had to wave furiously before the other understood he should pull up.

"Don't bother about being gentle," Kirk hollered as loud as he could. "She's unconscious. Just pull."

With Kaplan pulling and Jim pushing, they soon had Sondergaard up to the high bank. Exhausted, Jim dropped beside her. What were they going to do now, with a girl with a broken leg?

"Kris!" came a shout, and Kaplan stood up, looking for the owner of the voice.

"It's Stevens!" They could see his figure pounding along the bank on the other side. "Hey, Mike, over here! We've got Kris."

Stevens stopped, leaning over to breathe in deep gasps. Kirk looked at Kaplan. "If we tie both ropes together, do you think they'll reach over to Mike?"

"They'd better. He's not going to be swimming over here without the help, and we need him if we're going to get back with Kris." Quickly they undid the sling and let the ropes out.

"It's only going to work if I go back down on those rocks."

"You can't!"

"It's the only way. We can't get her back without Mike and I'll be damned if I'll sit here like a dummy pushing a homing device." Jim looped the ropes about his shoulder and dropped back down over the edge. Kaplan above was shouting instructions to Stevens. Then he, too, dropped over and joined Kirk at the river's edge. With the both of them pulling, it seemed for a moment as if Stevens would be lost to the rushing current. Every minute the river rose and the wind tore at the ropes. Jim slipped suddenly, losing the rope and wrenching his knee badly. Only because Kaplan was between him and the water was he saved from being swept away. Yet it gave them the final bit of desperate strength needed to pull Stevens in, and suddenly he was pulling himself up onto the rocks. They all lay gasping for a moment, unmindful of the rain or cold.

"Mike!" Above them Kris suddenly screamed, struggling to sit up. He ran to her, while Kirk and Kaplan stared at each other.

"We're going to have to hurry. Kris is going to be suffering from exposure, and they've both lost their packs."

Kaplan nodded. "Do you think we can rig a carry-bag of some kind with our two blankets? It's going to take two of us to carry her any distance."

"Don't count Stevens in. I think he dislocated his shoulder in that last effort."

"Damn!"

\* \* \* \* \*

For a long time afterward, Jim's nightmares included forging through dark forests, cold and wet, with dry rations at long intervals. The continued like this for hours, even after dusk. Kris became feverish and delirious, and Mike begged them to keep going. Eventually the torch failed, and the second one was dim; the others had been lost in the river. There was no longer any way to find their bearings, and they huddled together for warmth, finding very little of it.

With the first glimmers of dawn, Jim felt he could see well enough to find landmarks, and they started off once again. The rain had stopped at dawn, but the weather did not really improve. It was cold and sunless, while the wind seemed to blow through their survival jackets. Kirk stumbled on feet which no longer seemed to feel anything, though he had reassured himself there was no damage. They slipped together across the sodden leaves and pine needles that shifted treacherously.

Then suddenly, unbelievably, there it was. The trees seemed to part, and the shuttle lay in the clearing before them. The bright orange flags fluttered from staffs driven to odd angles by the wind. The clearing was deserted.

Kaplan broke away from the group, running across to the main hatch. He pounded on it. "Lieutenant Ito! Is there anyone here? We've got to get on board," he shouted.

It was no good. There was no one there, and the shuttle was locked up tight. The cadets looked at each other, wondering how to get into the thing now that they had finally found it.

"Maintenance panels," Jim said suddenly. The three ran around to the back of the vessel and stared at the variety of panels that were arrayed. "There has to be a way to do this logically. Surely it wouldn't be on security lock."

"Why didn't I pay better attention in Engineering?" Kaplan berated himself. His hands were running across the tops of the colored panels. "It's got to be here." His hands touched the lock and the main panel fell open before them. They grinned at each other.

Then they looked at the maze of wiring. "Green," Jim said quickly. "It's the green ones that go to ship operations -- red for propulsion, yellow for communications, blue for sensors."

"Thank you, Instructor Kirk," Kaplan said dryly. His hands were parting a section of green wires from the rest. "This section goes into the fuse box, should be for lights, air conditioning, that sort of thing."

Stevens took another section and pulled it out of the way. "This goes off to starboard; should be the galley. Here, this should be the hatches." He started

activating the wires. "What's happening?"

"Keep going, keep going," Kirk said slowly, watching the hatch. "There, that's it. He ran back along the side of the shuttle and hopped into the main cabin, making for the main console.

"Academy, come in. This is the student shuttle with a distress call. Do you read?" He set the communications board working, repeating the call, but there was no answer. Leaving the board on automatic, Jim went to the door. "Kaplan, I'm not getting any response. Can you tell if this thing is in working order?"

"Everything back here looks fine, as far as I can tell. Are all the telltales glowing?"

Jim turned back to the console as Stevens came aboard carrying Sondergaard. She was still feverish, and very weak, but she was rational at least.

"The board looks just like it's supposed to look, but nothing happens. Not even static. The receiver may be out," he called back to Kaplan. "Why don't you close that up and come on in. We can get something hot to eat."

Kaplan slammed the panel shut and hurried on into the shuttle. "Let's assume they heard us. We can repeat in half an hour if no one comes."

Stevens was struggling to get Kris settled in the back where an emergency bunk had been lowered. She smiled wanly and tried not to grimace. "There's got to be an emergency pack here, somewhere," she said eventually. "If you got it, do you think you could splint my leg better?"

The three males looked at each other hesitantly. "Well, we did it in physical training class," Mike said finally. "It wasn't that difficult."

"No, it wasn't," Jim said firmly, more to convince himself than the others. He rummaged around in the locker and came up with the first aid case. The emergency splint was on top.

Mike took it from him. "I'll put it on," he said quickly. "You two can hold her leg straight. Kirk, you take her foot; Kaplan, you hold here, just above the break."

In a short time the splint was in place, and everyone was breathing a little easier. "Is there something in there for pain?" Kris asked. Her eyes were wide, and sweat beaded her lip. "Let me look." Mike brought her the case, while Jim and Kaplan went looking around for something to eat.

All afternoon parties of other bedraggled students wandered in, most of them dirty and cold but not injured. Towards evening, a group of them went out to rescue George Boosalis, who'd been stuck under a fallen tree; but aside from Sondergaard, no one else was hurt. The soup and coffee from the shuttle supplies were sufficient for all, and soon the seats were littered with dozens of students curled up in jackets and blankets, trying to sleep.

Exactly at 1800 hours, Ito and the pilot returned, walking into the ship from across the cleared site. No one saw how they got there. Several of the cadets seemed to waken enough to see what was going on then went back to sleep when nothing much happened.

Kirk came up to Ito with a list of everyone present and accounted for. "We're all here, Lieutenant," he said. "Two people need medical attention immediately."

"Thank you, cadet," Ito replied. She glanced over the list, then took a brief look at Sondergaard and Boosalis. "Prepare for take-off," was all she said, turning away from Kirk to count the sprawled-out students for herself.

Jim stared at her in astonishment. Was that all? No explanations, no apologies? He leaned back in his seat, too angry and upset to sleep as the others were doing.

Jim was still angry when class time arrived the next afternoon. Finnegan marched the cadets to class with his customary accompaniment of disparaging remarks. "Looks like you kids got a little wet on your picnic. Hope it didn't spoil the fun and games." He eyed the bruised and battered Plebes with a grin, while they all stared back with ill-concealed hatred. Kirk wanted to grab Finnegan and shove those words down his throat to let him know who much fun and games there actually had been. He was too sore and exhausted even to try.

The last thing Ito had said as the students disembarked was to remind them the books were due at the class period. Jim had spent the evening and early morning completing his report, which had given him very little time to think clearly about the experience just ended. He was still greatly disturbed. Once in class, he had only enough time to find his seat before Ito asked, "Who has not completed their report?"

Five teams raised their hands, including Stevens. Sondergaard was not in class. "Another exercise will be programmed for you, but not like this one." Slowly she scanned the class and went on. "This class was more than a navigation exercise, as I am sure you realize by now. It was a practical test in resourcefulness and survival, one in which I am pleased to say the class came through quite well. You were under observation at several points, and your behavior has been made a part of your permanent profile."

Without even thinking Kirk was on his feet. "We were under observation, Lieutenant?"

Ito turned to meet his eyes. "That is correct."

"And did you know the weather would turn into such a storm?" he demanded.

"Of course."

"That weather almost killed Kris Sondergaard!"

"It was a calculated risk."

"Calculated risk! What gives you the right to deal with our lives that way? There is no justification for pushing us into danger we're not aware of."

Behind him the class was buzzing, and Ito quieted them with a sharp rap on her desk. "You are a member of Starfleet, Kirk. Risks are a part of that life."

"Not until we're fully trained. We've only been here for Plebe summer, hardly enough to know what we're up against. You're taking chances with the lives of green kids, not able-bodied explorers."

"That will be enough, cadet," Ito said flatly. "You will report to the Commandant's office immediately after class."

Kirk clamped his jaws shut and sat down. The room was deathly still as Ito began her lecture for the day. Automatically, Jim took notes; but he did not know what they said until later that evening when he read them over.

By the time the lecture was finished, Jim had regained his composure and was ready to face the Commandant. He had to walk over to the office section alone. No one offered to go with him.

The Commandant of the Academy was Gunnar Gustafsen, a man for whom travelling the starlanes was as natural as seafaring had been for his ancestors more than a thousand years before. Jim looked at the man's graven profile and ice-blue eyes as he read a report on the desk, and Jim's heart sank.

"Lieutenant Ito ordered me to report, sir. Cadet James T. Kirk, first year."

"You may sit down, Cadet." The Commandant was reading over Jim's own profile, Jim realized in dismay. He sat in agony while Gustafsen read silently.

"I understand you took exception to our little experiment with the navigation exercise," Gustafsen said finally.

"Not exactly, sir."

"Explain."

"I had no objection to the exercise, except that perhaps it was too easy." The Commandant's eyebrows rose, but he did not speak. "And I quite understand the need for the type of testing I have now learned was part of the purpose. But the attitude!" he exclaimed. "There was no need to treat us so callously."

"It seems that way to you, does it?"

"Ito called the injuries a calculated risk, and she said we were under observation. Did no one care that Sondergaard could have been killed?"

"I doubt very much whether she would have died. That river was well patrolled, and you reached her moments before someone else would have. From that time, you were all under constant surveillance, particularly when the emergency kit was in use after you reached the shuttle. We would have interrupted had it been a necessity. At no time would you have been permitted a dangerous mistake."

"But the risk, sir. That students under your care should have been left alone."

"You are Starfleet officers, cadet. That is a risk in itself. We are attempting to teach you to survive. One of these days, there will be a situation such as this, and there will be no observers to save you from yourselves. I think you underestimate yourself, and the abilities of your classmates. Even in six weeks as a Plebe, you have begun to act like an officer."

"Thank you sir."

"Not at all." Gustafsen rose and came around the corner of his desk. "After all, you were the only member of the class to express your indignation, and that is a mark in your favor. It will be noted in your file, along with your perfect score and the notation that you and Cadet Kaplan returned first."

"Thank you, sir," Kirk repeated, delighted.

"There's just one more thing. You were insubordinate in class, and you will also have a disciplinary mark. You are confined to your quarters, except for class, for the rest of the week and will be required to write a paper for Lieutenant Ito. See her about it immediately."

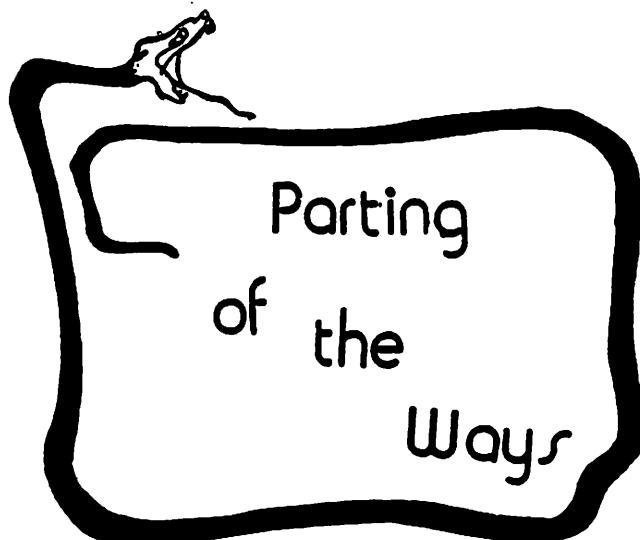
"Yes, sir."

"You are dismissed." The Commandant turned back to his work.

Jim turned smartly and left the office, his mind a conflicting set of emotions. The disciplinary mark hurt, and he didn't like the idea of writing another paper before the end of summer term. But that was almost hidden under the realization that he had been right in choosing Starfleet after all. How this situation had helped him reach that conclusion, he wasn't exactly sure. Part of it was the exhilaration and sense of accomplishment that the simple exercise had given him. He had found it natural to be out there, leading the others, using his mind and imagination to confront unknown situations. Even the danger and risk had excited him — his criticism of it had been from a concern for the others, not for himself.

Listening to the Commandant had been reassuring despite the brevity of the occasion. Jim realized that he had far more to learn about Starfleet than mere facts and techniques. Stopping in the main lobby, Jim looked up at the mural which encircled the rotunda above his head. The history of spaceflight was detailed there, the men and women who had come before shown proudly beside their accomplishments. They had led the way, and Jim swore to himself that someday his own deeds would be worthy to stand there as well.

Jim knew, at last, that he was in the right place.



Jim Kirk, senior lieutenant in Starfleet, and soon-to-be Lieutenant Commander Kirk he reminded himself frequently, let himself into the dark of his apartment and groped around for the light control. "Jan?" he called as he pushed the sensi-plate

and the room filled with light. "Janice, are you home?"

Across from him the pile of blankets on the daybed shifted and erupted. "Are you home already?" Jan lifted her head and looked at him blearily. "I must have fallen asleep. What time is it?"

"Supper time. What did you get? I'm starved." He dropped his books on his desk and stepped into the tiny kitchen. Opening the freezer unit he stared at the emptiness. "Jan! What are we supposed to eat tonight?"

"How should I know? It's your turn to cook." Janice stretched and knocked all the covers on the floor, her books tumbling after as she rose and padded on bare feet to stare over his shoulder into the freezer unit.

"But it's your turn to shop. You know that. What did you do today?" Jim sighed, an action which was becoming all too familiar as the weeks with Janice passed.

"I found this terrific book on the civilizations of ancient Camus. Fowler has this new theory about the—"

"Jan. I am hungry." Startled, she stopped and stared at him. "I have been in class since 0600 this morning, and I still have that paper in Engineering to finish before I can study for the exam. I had two cups of coffee and a chicken sandwich for lunch, and I want my dinner."

"There's some fruits and vegetables. How about a nice salad and some stir-fried veggies?"

It never failed to amaze Jim that she could not get one simple fact through her head. "I hate fruit salad, and stir-fried vegetables are not much better." He pulled a cold drink bottle from the shelf and slammed the door, searching as he did so for a jar of nuts he was sure was on the counter. "Come on, get some clothes on, and we'll go down to the student cafeteria again."

"No, I can run down to the commissary self service store in a few minutes and pick up some cutlets to grill, and maybe some prepared potato salad. OK?" Without waiting for an answer, Janice ran across the room into the tiny dressing room and quickly began to dress. Jim didn't argue. He was tired and simply wanted to rest, and Jan did owe him a week of shopping.

Shoving all of her things off the one decent chair, Jim collapsed into it and put his feet up on the daybed. Behind him he heard the door open and slide shut as Jan hurried out.

It was very quiet, and Jim was not ready to think about looking at his notes for his paper. Instead, his mind traveled to where his thoughts continually shifted lately, back to Jan. He had known her for nearly a year, ever since he had returned to Starfleet Academy for the Command course. He'd met her almost at once, in a seminar on extra-terrestrial civilizations. Jan had been the only Officer Candidate among all the other senior lieutenants of his Command Course. It was hard for her, but her quick mind and intelligence had kept her even with the rest of the class and had made Jim notice her as well. Right from the first he had been interested in her, despite her lack of physical appeal to him. When the class had been assigned projects to do together, they had been put in the same group since their names were in alphabetical sequence. Jan knew a tremendous amount about x-t civilizations, something she attributed to her parents traveling which had put her on thirty-nine planets in the course of her short life. They had come out of the course three months later with the top grade, and as lovers.

The memory of their first night together made Jim shift in his chair and take a long, cold drink. Her physical awareness, her natural responsiveness to him had been a total surprise. Jan seemed to have very little consciousness of herself as a sensual person. She paid no attention to clothes, the ones she did have being generally unsuited either to her age or her figure. She usually lounged around in scruffy robes she had owned since she was an undergraduate, or she studied, as she did today, naked, bundled up in the blankets. Jan ate whatever was at hand, which was why Jim often ended up doing more than his share of the cooking and shopping. She tended to pick up the easiest, most convenient things she could find. Nor did Jan share his love of music, unable to comprehend how he could occasionally fill the

tiny apartment with thundering sound from his meager store of recordings.

The first time he kissed her, it had been almost obligatory, a response to their work together. She seemed to expect something from him, and he had no objection. Jan was not unattractive, though her red hair and complexion were not his favorite combination and her figure tended to spread in some of what he considered the wrong places. However, the way she had kissed him back was something new in his experience, a total giving over of herself to him. Jan disappeared into something physical, animal. Amazed and delighted, they spent that night together, and the next, and had then gone searching for the tiny apartment. It wasn't the wisest thing he had ever done, but for a while it had seemed to work. In any case it was nearly over as Jan's Officer Candidate Course was due to end at the same time as his Command Course. Jim was beginning to think it would be for the best when they left each other.

Sighing again, Jim pulled himself up out of the chair and checked the chronometer. It wasn't that far to the commissary store, and Jan should be back soon. He ought to check the kitchen and see if there were any clean utensils to cook with. There weren't, Jan's dishes from breakfast and lunch still piled in the sink. He started, reluctantly, to clean it up. Again.

While he was washing, Jan came back with the groceries and put the cutlets on to grill. It did not take long until they could sit down to the table, and Jim was so hungry he didn't feel like talking. After awhile he looked up and realized that Jan was reading as she ate.

"Is that the reason why you didn't come to the lecture this afternoon, Jan?"

She looked at him confused. "Lecture, oh, I remember. Someone was going to be here from the quartermaster school to talk about planet expeditions and what kind of supplies to expect, costuming, that sort of thing. I'm not in any courses where that would be useful, and I wanted to read this." She looked back at the page.

"Jan, if you are serious about command, you have to realize that everything is useful, sooner or later. You come to these lectures whether or not anyone tells you to. It gets noted, and you never know when you might need the information."

"Were there any other women there?" she asked.

"A few. What difference does that make?"

"I won't intrude where I am not wanted. Starship Command is male territory, Jim. The more I go through this OC course, the more I realize it. If I'd been there, no one would have called on me; I wouldn't have been participating."

"But you'd have still been learning. Why won't you understand that?" Jim crumpled up his napkin and stood up impatiently. "Sure, it is harder for a woman to make it in command, no matter what anyone says; but that is partly because fewer women ever try. If you want it, Jan, you have as good a chance as I do, but you have to work at it as hard as I."

"Rot." Jan slammed her book shut and stood up to face him. "You are from an old Service family, you have contacts, you were brought up breathing Starfleet. Look at me, just over from the University and non-Academy into the bargain. Do OC candidates ever do as well as Academy men?" She laughed bitterly. "See, I said it again. Academy men. Aren't there any Academy women?"

"Over one third of each class is female."

"So why aren't one third of the higher officers women? Tell me that, James T. Kirk."

"How do you know they aren't?" he countered.

"I can count. I have had seventeen instructors in the OC course. Only two are women. How about your course?"

Jim considered. "Five out of twenty. That's not too bad."

"It's still only one quarter, not one third. And anyway, why isn't it one half? Last time I looked, the human race was fifty percent men, fifty percent women."

"How the hell do I know? Anyway, it doesn't make much difference where you are concerned. My point is that women do make it to the top. I can think of half a dozen female admirals offhand, and you want to be one." Jan nodded. "So you are

going to have to work at it. Ok, maybe harder than I have to, but you will have to put in some effort. Stop whining that you wouldn't be welcome in a lecture. I went, and you should have, too."

Here they were, arguing again. It seemed to get worse every day. It was always about the same thing. How many times had he said this to her before? His dinner sat hard and lumpish in his stomach, and his head was starting to hurt.

Jan stared at her plate, her mouth clenched. "You will never understand what I mean."

"No, I don't think I will." He went over to his desk and began sorting through his notes. "You make no sense to me, Jan. It isn't logical."

"It makes sense to me." She rose and began clearing off the table with sharp movements. "I suppose I do the clean up, too."

"That's the agreement. I do the cooking and laundry this week, you shop and clean up. Pardon me if it interferes with your life, but it does have to get done."

Jan didn't reply, just set to making a terrific noise in the kitchen. How she could do that with so few dishes astonished him, and it was a long time before he could relax enough to get into his books and be unconscious of her. The room, or the time.

"Jim?" Jan's voice cut into his thoughts much later, and he looked up from the paper he was rereading for accuracy. "Are you almost finished?"

Her appearance was a surprise, for she was making a special effort to please him. She'd washed her hair and dried it into a fluffy style unlike her usual lack of style. Her dress was the blue one he had given her for her birthday, the one she called an extravagance and unsuited to a student. Somehow it accentuated her fairness and made her pale eyes a deeper shade while the lines of the drape showed off to best advantage her trim legs and shapely feet. Jim smiled.

"If I weren't, I would be now. You look lovely, Jan."

"No, I don't, but it's nice of you to say so." Selfconsciously she reached out for him. "I don't want to argue, Jim. Really. It just seems as if we're fighting if we aren't making love."

Jim rose from the chair and took her hand, bending his head down to kiss her fingers. "Well, this is no time of night to be fighting. Or do you have a third alternative?"

"Not if you're finished studying." Her eyes danced at him, and the anger of earlier was forgotten. Already, the anticipation of being in his arms was changing her, hiding the awkward and belligerent student behind the mask of the lover. Or was the student the mask? Jim had no way of knowing. He just knew that when she came to him like this, he could no more stop his own reaction than he could stop a starship dead in its tracks. "I love you, Jim," she whispered. "I want you. Make me feel alive; make me feel the way you do."

So he kissed her; and kissed her again, and again. It was very late at night before Jim finally got to sleep, his papers and exams very far from his thoughts.

As usual, a night like that seemed to clear the air a little, and for a week there were no fights. Both of them were too busy, in any case, to do more than finish the last of their papers, study for exams, prepare for meetings with tutors and department committees. Jim thought it possible that he might not sleep again until graduation, the way he was on the move from one thing to another. He would leave the apartment early, sometimes even before Jan awoke, and he was always back late. Jim spent his study time in the library where he could use the materials for free, the cost of installing a computer terminal in the apartment having been more than his finances could manage.

Two days before the end of exams, Jim came home at 2130 and found Jan crying on the sofa.

"Where have you been?" she asked, hiccupping. "I've been needing you so much."

"What's the matter?" His mind conjured up all sorts of awful possibilities as he sat down beside her and took her in his arms. She drew against him, shivering.

"I am going to fail communications." She buried her head against his chest. "I talked to Commander DeFine this afternoon, after he had read my exam. It's no

good. Jim, I just don't understand what it is I've done wrong, but I seem to have missed the whole point of what we were doing."

Jim was stunned. "Jan, I'm so sorry, I had no idea. I'd have helped you if I'd known. Now what happens? Will they let you repeat the one course?"

Shaking her head, Jan said, "My standing in the class isn't high enough for that. It seems that the only things I've done well in at all are x-t civ. and engineering. My work in security and defense techniques are only minimally acceptable." Jan started to cry again, her hands over her face.

Holding her tightly, Jim didn't know what to say. He knew that command had become an obsession with her and that it was going to be very hard for her to realize that it was impossible now. A little selfishly he knew he could never tell her he had just been told his own class standing, first out of a class of 247. "What will you do now?" he asked again.

"Commander DeFine was very nice about it. He's talked to the Commandant, and they are going to arrange to send my records to the School for Ancient Civilizations on Aldebaran II. They think I show a remarkable aptitude for archaeology and ancient civilizations, and they assure me that I will be accepted if I want to go. But how can I? If I do that, I'd never have my own command. Jim, I want to serve on a starship."

"You could go on a starship as a technician, maybe even A and A officer, if you go to the Aldebaran school. It sounds like a good solution."

"I don't want a tech rating, Jim. I want command. I want flag rank. Isn't there some way we can do it? What if I came with you? I know you did well; you'll be a lieutenant commander now. Maybe you can get me aboard your ship, and I'll learn. Jim, you know I can learn quickly. A little experience is all I need; I've never even been on a starship. Jim, please. Will you do it?"

"I can't make that decision, Jan." He pulled away from her and stood up, resenting her for putting this on him. "You'd be making a big mistake, and I won't help you even try. Besides, they understand these things in the Officer Candidate program. If they thought you could do it, they would have made the offer themselves. Go to Aldebaran, Jan, and forget about command." It was brutal and Jim hated having to say it, but it was necessary.

The light died out of Jan's eyes, to be replaced by an expression he had never seen before. "You don't want to have anything to do with me." Jan's voice rose alarmingly as she went on. "Admit it. I was handy as long as we were here, but now I embarrass you. I'm a failure, a woman who got what she deserved."

"That's not true," he replied firmly, wondering what she was going to say next.

"Of course it is. Starfleet doesn't want women getting in the way. When there's someone, like me, who wants command badly, they feel it and they fight it. And you're with them on it. You back them up. Why are you trying to send me to Aldebaran? Don't you love me anymore?"

"Jan, it isn't that." Jim stared at her, wondering if she were losing her sense of reality. How had he lived with her for so long and never realized that she had this bottled inside her, illogical and unreasoning hatred for Starfleet?

"Then marry me. Take me along with you. I'll play the game and stay out of your way; just let me come with you."

"That is not the answer. We can't marry now. "I'm not in a position to marry anyone, and you need to go to that school." With a painful flash of insight, Jim realized that she had never loved him at all. Only the thought of his growing position in Starfleet and his eventual power had attracted her. "What kind of a life would we have if I get a command and you are jealous of it? And you would be jealous, Jan; just listen to yourself. You want that for yourself, not to live through me. We'd be miserable, at one another's throats all the time."

"But I will never have it, not now!"

One last time he tried to reason with her. "Go to Aldebaran, Jan. Give it time and see what comes of your studies there. I'll come and see you, keep in touch." He did not really want to, knowing that what had been between them was lost

in the overwhelming tide of this new side of her bursting out.

Jan pulled away from him her face contorted with anger and hate. "Get out," she screamed. "Get out and don't come back. I never want to see you again. I'll show you, and I'll show them. I'll go to Aldebaran, and someday, I don't know how, I'll have my command. Then we'll see who has the last word. Only get out of my sight."

Jim gritted his teeth and clenched his fists so tightly the nails dug into the palms. Turning on his heel, he went into the dressing room to pack his bags. Behind him, he could hear Jan collapsed again on the sofa, sobbing in a high, thin, breathless way. After a while she stopped and he heard her get up and go out the door, leaving him alone.

Jim went into the kitchen and took a stiff drink to calm his shaking nerves. Of all the scenes he had imagined of ending their relationship, this one had never entered his mind. Hurriedly he went back to his packing, trying to think of a friend he could move in with for the last few days before graduation. It was a relief to be thinking of going back to active duty.

It did not take long to gather his possessions, since a starship life does not lead to collecting vast amounts of useless articles. All he could claim were clothes and books. Stopping at the door, his eyes surveyed the room swiftly to see if there was anything he had missed. On the table by the sofa he saw the small package he had bought Jan, to celebrate both their graduations. She would not want a silver and jeweled Starfleet insignia now, particularly one engraved with their initials. Sadly Jim pocketed it, wondering what he would do with it. Then he turned out the light and shut the door. It was a big universe. If he were lucky, maybe he would never see Janice Lester again.

## Outbreak on Ostergard

"Medical personnel to the briefing room," came the impersonal voice of the com. tech on duty through the ship's intercom. Leonard McCoy sat up abruptly, startled at the intrusion into his reading. With a slight grumble he pushed the button on his own unit and spoke.

"On my way." His thoughts turned to a favorite theme as he pulled on his shirt. "When I am Chief Medical Officer, I think I'll have the engineers work up some sort of system that will do away with these infernal briefings." As he went out the door and turned towards the turbolift, he expanded on the idea. "I'll give all the medical staff beepers that I can call directly and have them check in." McCoy grinned to himself as he stopped in front of another cabin door.

"Rob Jon, are you in there?" he hollered as he pounded. "Come on, we're wanted." There was a brief muttering and fumbling sounds, and McCoy's grin grew

wider. It was always about ten to one that Rob Jon was not alone, had been that way ever since McCoy could remember.

Rob Jon came hurriedly into the corridor. "They pick the damdest times for these blessed conferences," he said shortly, and eyed McCoy severely. "Now, stop yo' grinnin' Lee-Boy, 'fore I do somethin' hasty!" They turned down the corridor and into the briefing room, squeezing their way to stand in the back.

The Chief Medical Officer, Ishi Nakamura, greeted them with cold stares and immediately plunged into the briefing. "Gentlemen, we have just received a priority two distress call from the Ostergard Colony on Kappa IV. They are experiencing a minor outbreak of Corellian Pox, with which I trust you are all familiar." There was a brief pause as everyone cast around in his mind for the details. Then Nakamura went on. "As yet, the disease seems confined to two minor areas and is of a mild nature. Therefore we will only be sending in a small portion of our direct contact teams in order to carry out immunization and treatment for the sick people. The Lexington will drop the teams in three days and will return when requested. I will not be going down; Dr. Leonard McCoy will be the commanding officer for this operation."

McCoy missed what came next as Rob Jon poked him in the ribs with an elbow and hissed, "Is that a promotion or demotion?"

"Demotion, probably, for opening my big mouth so often," McCoy hissed back. "I'm a doctor, not a CO!" But secretly, inwardly, he was pleased. He'd been in the Space Service a long time, but he had always felt his initial lack of experience in space medicine had hindered his advancement. And too many of his assignments had been on small bases or temporary installations. This was more like it!

Three days later the Lexington drew into orbit around Kappa IV and began the drop of the medical teams. McCoy had spent the entire time living with the problem, arranging for supplies, equipment, and personnel. In fact, he'd discovered one of the biggest crosses that a CO had to bear: your friends always wanted a little favor.

"Come on, Lee," Rob Jon had plead. "I want to be in the city. Don't send me out into the wildwoods. The nurses and orderlies can give shots to the well ones. Let me stay in the hospital where I can be around people."

For "people" read "women", McCoy thought sourly, but he let Rob Jon have his way, knowing the reasoning was good. Doctors were needed with the sick. He sighed a little as he packed his gear and headed for the Transporter Station to beam down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tiredly Meg sank into her desk chair and leaned her head on her hands. She wasn't used to all the constant running and cleanup the sick children required. A Starbase hospital almost never had any children at all; a few babies delivered, an assortment of broken bones from junior spacemen, this was what she expected. Is this disease ever going to run its course, she wondered. Every time we check out a patient, we get a new one, or two. Fortunately -- her thoughts were interrupted by a cry.

"Mommy!" Seven year old Susu was tangled in the restraints and crying.

"It's all right, sugar. I'm here to help." Meg turned up the light and began to gently unwrap the tapes from her arms.

"Exactly what do you think you are doing?" came a harsh voice behind her, and Meg jumped. Turning slightly she saw a man in medical uniform and continued with her task as she spoke.

"The child has become tangled in her restraints. I'm redoing them, Doctor."

He knelt beside her and put one hand on Susu's forehead. "Are they so ill you must tie them down?" he asked.

"It prevents them from scratching and making sores. There is simply no way to keep a sleeping child from doing so. You see, I've kept the restraints loose enough for some motion." With his help Meg quickly finished the job, and Susu rolled over on her side and went to sleep again. For the first time Meg got a good look at the doctor as she rose, and she liked what she saw.

What she saw was a solidly built man of above middle height, with a thick shock

of hair she could tell he worked hard to keep in place. He was still looking down at the little girl, then turned to her with fantastically blue eyes that seemed to bore right through her.

"She's the first one I've seen. Have you had many children ill?" No introduction, just right to work. Meg answered the same way.

"The children are sicker than the adults; many of them develop respiratory problems. We've had two cases of pneumonia, one with complications. That child is still on a respirator." She turned back to the desk. "Would you like to see the records?"

"Not just yet," he said. Then he smiled, and she was amazed at the way it lit up his whole face. "Excuse me, my dear. I'm Leonard McCoy, from the Starship Lexington. I'm—" He didn't get a chance.

"You're here with an emergency team!" she exclaimed in delight. "Thank God. You can't imagine how much we've needed some help. None of us have gone off duty in weeks. Tonight seemed quiet, and I let the duty nurse take a nap while I station sat for her."

McCoy looked at her quizzically. "And you are..."

"Doctor Margaret Adams, pathologist," she answered.

"Ah, just the doctor I was looking for, although no one thought to mention Doctor Adams was beautiful." He leaned over the desk to the com unit and pushed a button. "McCoy here, I'm in pediatrics with Doctor Adams. Send up a couple of my nurses to relieve her and we'll be down in a minute." He turned to Meg who was self-consciously smoothing her hair in response to his remark. "Hope you don't mind a lab session for a while. We need you to tell us what's going on here, and then you can go home for a good long sleep."

"That will be fine, Doctor. If you'll excuse me I'll wake the nurse and let her know the change in plans." Meg crossed the room to the duty nurse's quarters and went on in. When she came back out, Dr. McCoy was showing the restraint system to the two nurses with him.

"The restraints are very important," Meg emphasized as she came up behind them. "The poxes tend to become easily infected, and the resultant marks are very disfiguring. I am ready to go now, Doctor."

They spent a half hour in the lab with some of her own staff and the starship team. As they left, for the first time she felt as though they were actually going to control the outbreak before every person in the colony became ill. Together she and McCoy walked over to the doctor's quarters across a park that encircled the base hospital. The sun was starting to rise, a yellow-orange ball that glowed hugely on the horizon in front of them. McCoy didn't even look at it.

"I notice that the disease seems to have started in the civilian spaceport area. Were you able to trace it?" he asked.

"Yes," Meg nodded, wondering if he ever took his mind off work. "A crewmen from one of the non-quarantined ships borrowed a friend's pass to the trade center, to visit some ladies." She cleared her throat, noting that McCoy was suppressing a grin. "The ladies in question managed to pass along the disease to quite an astonishing number of local men and other traveling crewmembers before actually becoming ill two weeks later. The resultant chain of contagion is unbelievable."

"Good thing this wasn't Rigellian Fever."

"A very good thing indeed, Doctor." They had reached her quarters now, and Meg asked, "Will I continue to work with your staff until your teams leave the colony?"

"I'd like you to," McCoy said thoughtfully. "Your staff can return to their other duties for the time being, but we do need someone local working with us. Goodnight, Doctor. I'll see you in the morning."

\* \* \* \* \*

McCoy spent the next few weeks working harder than he had ever known he could work. It seemed as though any moment he was away from the patients, he was buried under a mountain of reports. Meg Adams' help proved invaluable to him, the more so since he didn't have anyone on his own staff able to give the same kind of help. She seemed to have a knack for setting up schedules, knowing how long it would take

for a contact team to immunize in a settlement and pack up to move on. Now as she came in with a status report he exclaimed,

"I think this colony is growing larger while I sit here. Are we really only one-third of the way through?"

Meg smiled. "Only just. And I think the disease is spreading faster than our coverage. There are outbreaks now in two areas farther out than our teams have reached."

"Let me look at that!" He grabbed the report away from her and quickly scanned it. Meg sank down at her own desk.

"I'm going to rearrange the schedules in that direction and move one of the other teams over to help cover the area. Perhaps that way it will stop the spread." She turned to her own scanner and began to compare the team itineraries.

McCoy looked up from his desk and watched her silently for a moment. From where he sat he could see her in profile, dark hair pulled softly into a knot at the base of her neck, dark tendrils free in curls at the hair line. One tiny ear escaped the bonds of the tight hair and a gold stud winked as she moved her head.

"You'd like to be out there, wouldn't you?" McCoy asked suddenly.

"I'm a doctor, not a travel agent," she said absently. McCoy's heart lifted slightly to hear his own remark come back to him. He rose and went over to sit on the side of her desk.

"If this gets any worse one of us will have to take out another team. Would you like to go?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed, her face lighting. McCoy was entranced by it, but before he could say anything someone came in. There was a stricken look on the man's face as he dropped a report form in front of Meg and she grabbed it up quickly.

"What is it?" she asked, her eyes quickly scanning the report. She looked up to McCoy with a serious expressing in her eyes. "The disease has spread to the mountain people."

"What are they?" he asked.

"No one is quite sure," Meg answered. "This was one of the first colonies and the initial surveys were scantily done. After we'd been here about fifty years, we found the mountain people peacefully tucked away in several high valleys far to the south. We don't think they are indigenous and there are several theories about them. Possibly they are descendants of an earlier colony, or a sleeper ship, or slaves brought here ages ago. They have several legends about coming from elsewhere. What is important is that they are completely humanoid and very susceptible to our diseases; they don't seem to have any of their own. This could very likely wipe them out entirely."

"Then we've got to get to them now!" McCoy declared.

Meg shook her head. "I'd hoped we could eliminate the disease before it spread to them. I'm not over-estimating when I say there are probably sixty or seventy villages, spread out over the area of, oh, Australia on Terra. And they have a minimum altitude of about 6000 feet above sea level. And the mountain currents are very treacherous for air vehicles; we almost never go into them. There is an agent who keeps a station in an area where the tribes have a kind of meeting place."

McCoy stood up. "I'm going to discuss this with your Chief Medical Officer. See if you can work out a team and schedule by the time I get back. I'll arrange for the supplies and equipment."

"May I put down my own name?" she asked quickly.

"Go right ahead. I'm not making any promises, but we'll see what the CMO says. Be back as quick as I can." McCoy hurried out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm not going, Lee!" Rob Jon's voice was determined. He emphasized it with a sweeping gesture of his hand. "The chances that we can do them any good are just about zero, and the risks are too high. We're needed here by our own people, Lee. They're just a bunch of savages."

McCoy stared in amazement. He had thought he knew his old friend. Now he

wondered. "They'll die, Rob, without some help. Doctor Adams says they are very sensitive to our diseases."

"You're over-reacting again. I doubt the disease can get very far advanced in those cold mountains. You said yourself their limited mobility will keep the Pox from spreading very far." Rob was barely paying attention any longer, his mind back on his own work."

"I'm ordering you to go, Rob. There has to be a good general doctor along for the sick ones."

"You can't order me, Lee." Rob turned to him with an odd sort of expression.

"I'm Commanding Officer for this operation," McCoy said quietly.

"But my date of rank precedes yours!"

"Only by so much time as it took for the Commandant to get to McCoy from Callahan. Rob, if you won't go, I'm not going to forget it. It'll go in my report when we get back." McCoy turned and headed for the door, then turned back to say, "I'm going with the team, and I'm leaving Lieutenant Bernstein in command. You can think about that until I get back."

McCoy flew down the corridor in a rage and burst into the office he shared with Meg Adams. He began slamming papers and reports around on his desk with a fine disregard for their contents.

"Whatever is the matter?" Meg exclaimed.

"A slight disagreement with Dr. Callahan," McCoy said tightly. "I will be going with the team to the mountains. May I please see what you have done since I left?"

Silently Meg handed over the preliminary work she had done in the hour he was gone. McCoy scanned it briefly, and they began to discuss the details. There was no more mention of Rob Callahan, and it was taken for granted that Meg would go with McCoy when the team left.

It was early in the morning two days later when the shuttle with the medical team aboard finally took off for the mountains to the south. The four members had spent most of the time studying what little was known about the mountain people and gathering appropriate equipment. They also needed medication for themselves to be able to work at the high altitude, and plenty of warm gear for the cold weather far to the south. Once on board and aloft, Meg found everyone else fall into that handy way of sleeping everywhere that every doctor, except herself, managed to learn in residency. She sat back in her seat and watched the sky reel behind them. It rather hypnotized her, and she was not really aware of the passage of time until McCoy suddenly spoke beside her.

"Getting hungry?" he asked.

"Why yes, I think I am," she said in surprise. He handed her a mug of coffee and a doughnut. "Mmmm, thanks. How did you know I am a doughnut addict?"

"You made out the supply lists, and there are four dozen aboard. Do you really plan to carry them to the villages?" Those fantastic blue eyes grinned at her over his own mug.

Meg laughed. "No, I'm planning to leave them at the Agent's quarters until we get back. If I've got the schedule right, we can do the villages in groups of ten, then come back to the Agent's to replenish our supplies. Keep us from carrying everything at once, and I get fresh doughnuts on every trip!"

"Now that's what I like about a good staff member. Always one step ahead in the planning." McCoy leaned back in the seat beside her and closed his eyes. "You know, this is the first time since I've reached your planet that I've been able to sit with nothing to do. Think I'll continue to take advantage of it." It was only a moment until his regular breathing told her he was back asleep again.

Meg turned to sit so she could get a good look at him. Asleep, with his animation gone, she wasn't quite sure what it was that attracted her to him; but it was real, no doubt about that. From the first moment she saw him she had known he was a very special person to her, and lately she realized that he was starting to feel that way about her. What am I going to do? she thought miserably and turned away. This time she was able to sleep and only awoke when the shuttle finally

landed at the Agent's high in the mountains.

They started immediately clearing the boxes of supplies out of the shuttle to turn it into a combination office, sickbay, and quarters. While they worked Agent Isenberg filled them in on the details as he knew them; he had been the one to report the first cases to the medical authorities.

"About a month and a half ago we had some traders in here from the north, and several of the tribes came in for a market session. They had a lot of exotic goods, probably from a spacefreighter of some type, and there was a lot of trading for the carvings the tribes do."

"There's our link with the one sick man who arrived here," Meg commented. "We are going to have to do something about that quarantine procedure." McCoy nodded, and Isenberg went on.

"Unfortunately, several of these tribes took the long way home and visited with relatives in the other valleys. I've tried to reconstruct where who went when, knowing it would help you, but I'm afraid it is pretty hopeless. Some of them haven't reached home yet." He handed a group of papers over to Meg, who groaned.

"I knew I'd have to change my own schedules, but this is ridiculous. Excuse me everyone while I go rearrange our lives for the next couple of weeks." She disappeared into the back of the shuttle with the two sets of lists and a map of the area. After a while she commandeered the pilot, and between them they managed to make some sense out of what they were trying to do. Finally McCoy poked his head in.

"Are we able to at least get started before it gets dark?" he asked. "I want to be at work first thing in the morning."

Meg looked at the pilot. "Shall we start with that eastern area, Barnes?" she asked.

Barnes stood up. "Might as well. Nothing is very good for flying around here, and at least that seems clear for the moment."

By good luck none of the first ten villages they visited had anyone very ill with the Pox. A few of the children had mild cases, one or two of the adults in each a more severe case. They managed to inoculate and treat each one in about a day, and two weeks later found them back at the Agent's. This time he had more detailed information on which villages were most affected, and they changed the plan once again to include the most severely ill villages first. The trips got harder, too, as the weather grew closer to winter and storms became more frequent. Twice they had to land the shuttle over a mile from the village and walk in carrying all their equipment. The second time they did that, they were greeted only by snowcovered silence. Nothing moved in the village.

"Where the hell is everybody?" McCoy growled, dropping his pack at his feet. "They surely wouldn't have gone visiting in this weather."

Meg bit her lip. "I think they are still here," she said. "Let's look around." They each hurried in a different dwelling and looked in, then hurried on to the next, tricorders and scanners humming. Shortly they all met in a group at the village center.

"They're here still," Dena said. "We didn't make this one in time."

McCoy pounded with a gloved hand on the village totem beside him. "Damn! We needed six groups like ours. Why didn't someone say these people were here? If Starfleet had sent more teams, these people would still be alive."

The other nurse asked quietly, "What shall we do with them now?"

"We don't have time to do anything," Meg said. "There are a lot of other villages to reach."

To her intense surprise McCoy turned on her savagely. "We can't just leave these people like this. They deserve burial or whatever their customs require. Somebody call the Agent and find out what to do."

The pilot turned and headed back towards the shuttle. "I'll find out. Be back as quick as I can."

The four team members collapsed where they were, not wanting to seek the shelter of one of the dwellings. For a long time no one spoke, then Meg said, "We

still have a lot of places to visit. I think we will have to divide into two sections. Dena and Cal can take the vaccine and some of the treatment equipment and go to the villages the Agent says are least affected. That will leave Doctor McCoy and myself to go where our skills are really needed. Maybe this way we can prevent what happened here."

McCoy objected. "We need to send both teams into the sickest villages and treat them first."

"No, I agree with Doctor Adams. What we've seen so far looks as though if we can treat a village before the illness takes hold, we can save it. If many of the people are sick, I believe we could only save a few." Dena surprised everyone by speaking so emphatically. "I've been on plague planets twice," she added. "Prevention works much better than cure."

Meg was struck by the look of pain that crossed McCoy's face. "There will be so much suffering," he said. "We've got to ease that."

"If we prevent them being ill, isn't that the same?" asked Meg, coming over to stand next to him. "With two teams we can accomplish both ends."

Cal put in his contribution. "Dena and I couldn't be much help with this. If we go together to do the inoculations, you two doctors can go through the other villages a lot faster."

McCoy did not speak and Meg decided to intervene. "We'll decide later, after we're all back at the shuttle. Dena, Cal, you go on back. When Barnes returns we'll do what we can and then follow you." McCoy stood silently next to the totem, staring into nothing. Silently Dena and Cal took up as much equipment as they could and headed back down the path to the shuttle.

"Lee," Meg said, adopting the name Rob Jon always used. "Do you want to tell me what is the matter?"

"Isn't it enough to find a village of dead people?" he blazed.

"No, it isn't. You and I are used to death, we see it every day. You are not being practical about what we should do." Meg stood directly in front of him, to force him to look at her.

"But I'm a doctor to prevent death from winning," McCoy cried, moving away from her, unable to stand still. "I've lost too many people to death when I could do nothing to help them; my mother, my sister."

"Did you become a doctor to defeat death or to help people?" Meg asked after a moment.

He stared at her. "I don't know," he answered finally.

"Well, I chose to help people, and that is what I intend to do now. Dena and Call must go to the well villages and inoculate, while we treat the sick. I'll go by myself if I have to, but I think it will work best this way."

"Let me think, Meg," McCoy turned away again. "We don't have to decide until the shuttle is ready to leave."

Just then Barnes came running into the village. He was panting with the cold and the exertion. "We burn the village," he said, handing them each a phaser. "When something like this happens, the village has to be burnt to keep the ghosts from walking."

The three stood in the center of the small square, turning their phasers on each of the dwellings in turn. When all had caught fire thoroughly, they stood for a long time watching the final destruction of what had died a short time earlier. Tears dimmed Meg's eyes, and she barely noticed McCoy's sudden turning away. As he reached the edge of the clearing he turned back to her.

"Let's get out of here. We have work to do." His voice was gruff, but he held out his hand. Meg took it for comfort and followed him down the path and away from the lost village.

They stayed the night where the shuttle had landed and debated back and forth what to do. In the end McCoy finally agreed that Meg's plan was best. When they took off at first light, they had divided everything two ways; Cal and Dena to go on with the inoculations, Meg and McCoy to fight death more directly.

After four days, McCoy had to agree that his reservations against the plan were

unfounded. He and Meg were still in the second village they had reached, while Cal and Dena had managed to treat six. In two of those there had been no one ill at all, the others with only mild cases. With these six villages taken care of, McCoy was able to think more clearly about the two he was treating with Meg. They seemed to have done all they could with these, leaving them with medicine and instructions for new cases while they went on to the next.

"I wonder how things are going back at the Base Hospital," Meg wondered one evening as they sat exhausted in their office. She was holding a cup of coffee tightly for the warmth. With the shuttle moving two groups back and forth, it could no longer be their shelter and they used native buildings where possible.

"Hope this teaches the Quarantine section a lesson. Damn stupid to let that spacejockey with the Pox ever get out of the port." McCoy took a sip of his coffee. "Wish this was something a little stronger. Well, Rob Jon ought to have cured it all by now if he's as good a doctor as he thinks he is."

"Did you really put him on report?" Meg asked.

"Had to. There are things you do and things you don't report friends for. This was one of the times I had to. He had no business acting the way he did!"

"You take things very seriously, don't you, Lee?"

"Life is serious. Goodnight, Meg." McCoy rose abruptly and disappeared behind the partition into his own sleeping area. Meg looked after him thoughtfully for a minute, wondering what went on in that shaggy head of his. It was easy to think of him as soft until you ran into a rockhard place where he simply did not yield. She sighed as she followed his example and went off to bed.

It wasn't very long until Meg lost all track of time and place. Her usually orderly mind simply refused to register how many arms she had filled with vaccine, how many ill children she had coaxed into taking medicine. The sights and sounds in all of the villages were so similar, the faces of despair so exactly the same that they all merged into one. She became content to go where the pilot took them, to let Barnes work out schedules with the others and the tribal agent. When she wasn't at work, she was asleep; and she rarely spoke with McCoy more than to say, "We're running short on medicine here, Doctor," or "Let me handle that one while you rest a minute."

It was late one evening when they closed down operations in one village and made ready to go on to the next. "I want to go now," she heard say to McCoy. "there's a storm coming up and we can beat it if we leave now. If we don't we might get stranded here."

"You know best," McCoy answered. Anything else that was said Meg lost in the whirr of starting engines and the sound of the wind rising outside the shuttle. Exhausted, Meg pulled down one of the berths in the wall of the aft cabin. She was asleep before Bares reached cruising speed.

Meg had not been asleep for very long, dimly aware all the time of being tossed by buffeting winds, when she could feel the pull of increased acceleration. As she began to force herself awake, Meg was thrown violently against the end of the bunk and was instantly knocked unconscious.

When she came to, the shuttle had landed and all power was out. It was very dark in the cabin, with only the faintest glow from some of the emergency system telltales to let her know she was not blind. In alarm Meg tried to rise, calling for McCoy, only to slip on the dangerously tilted floor. She scrambled as best she could to the door between the cabins and tried to force it open. It refused to budge. Confused in the dark she searched with her hands along the wall to locate the panel for the manual controls. She was still calling McCoy and listened to herself in an abstract way as though it had nothing to do with her. Then she heard him answer.

With a final tug on the controls she forced the door open enough to get in and crawled along the floor until she found him. He was spinned beneath one of the seats, his right leg unable to pull free. "Oh, Lee, I was so frightened!" Awkwardly in the dark she sought his arms.

"I was afraid you were dead, or caught like I am. I've been fighting to get

free for hours. Are you all right?"

"I hit my head when we crashed, I guess. It's OK now. I'm going to get a phaser." Meg crawled back to the aft cabin and located the arms locker. It only took a moment for the force beam from it to shear away the seat that held McCoy, and he rose to stand weakly beside her.

"We've landed nose down," he said. "I don't think Barnes could have made it." "I'll check," Meg said with a gulp.

"No, let me. I've seen this kind of thing often. You get the door." Meg was glad to let him look into the cockpit. McCoy only took a glance and turned back. "He took the full impact. Let's go back to the other cabin."

Back in the quarters section Meg eased McCoy down on the open bunk and set out to find the emergency generator she had forgotten about earlier. It was starting to get cold in the shuttle, and she needed light to examine McCoy's leg properly. As she came back from activating the generator, McCoy was gradually peeling off the remains of a shredded boot.

"That looks awful, Lee. Lean back and let me worry about it." She expected an argument, and when she didn't get it Meg knew it was as bad as it looked. Very gently she cleaned off the leather and dirt, then sprayed it with a foam antibacterial and tissue regenerator. When she looked up at him, he had passed out. Quickly Meg ran another scanner across McCoy. "Shock and exhaustion," she thought with relief. That was no problem: another shot and a soft sock bandage, and she was done.

It was ten minutes before McCoy opened his eyes. In that time she had done a swift round of the quarters, clearing up broken items and checking supplies. Before anything else Meg had activated a body functions panel and hooked McCoy into it. It was the first thing he noticed when he awoke.

"What the hell is this foolishness?" he exclaimed.

"Just insurance," Meg said grinning. "I'm not in any state to trust my own judgment." She reached down for a scanner and passed it to him. McCoy was a doctor the way other people drive: they can't stand to let anyone else at the controls. When he had finished with it and was examining her handiwork, Meg asked, "Do you know what happened?"

"Not really. We did hit that storm Barnes thought he could miss, and it was a humdinger. He wasn't getting good readings from the sensors and couldn't tell exactly where we were. We must have zipped when we should have zagged." McCoy scooted himself off the bunk and limped over to Meg.

"Don't you think you ought to keep off of that?" she asked mildly.

"No. Where is the distress beacon? Did you activate it?" She could tell he was trying to get rid of his tension by doing something. It was easier for Meg to remain calm.

"Yes, it's activated. I tried the radio, but nothing happened. I don't know if it is the weather or if it is broken. We'll have to wait."

"Of all the rotten tricks of fate. Here we are stuck while all of those sick people. . . ."

"That's not useful, Lee. Try to relax. Sit down and don't use that foot."

"It's no damn good to say that!" he shouted. "Why don't you help me do something?"

"Because there's nothing you can do!" Meg shouted back. "Now sit down and shut up. You're acting like a first year med student at his first delivery."

Startled he stared at her, then McCoy grinned. "All right, Doctor. Can I at least ask if you found some food and if we can have something hot to drink?"

"That you can ask." Meg found her way cautiously across the tilted floor. "I put two meals in the warmer and activated the coffee processor." Carefully she drew these out and set them on the small table between the bunks. "We aim to please."

"Thanks. This should be just what the doctor ordered."

As they started to eat, they realized how hungry all the activity had made them, and neither spoke till they were nearly done. Then Meg asked,

"How long do you think it will be before we're found?"

"Couple of days, I suppose. Depends on the storm, and if they can land to take us in or if they have to walk in." McCoy was thinking with his brains again and not with his adrenal glands, which reassured Meg.

"We're low on supplies since we were due to go back to the Agent's place after the next village. We should be OK though if nothing gets worse with that leg of yours," Meg said thoughtfully.

McCoy frowned. "Can't see why it should, Meg. You did a good job with it and it feels as good as can be expected. Now, I want you to go to sleep before you go into shock. Nothing more is going to happen tonight."

Nothing did go wrong, exactly, but the emergency generator was not up to keeping a comfortable temperature in a wrecked shuttle near the south pole. They both awoke a few hours later, shivering and stiff. It was light outside, the pale sun coming in the row of small windows at the back over the engine. Meg hopped quickly out of bed and hurried to check in the supply locker. She came back with more blankets.

"You'd better check my temperature, Meg," McCoy said briefly.

She ran the scanner across him and confirmed. "It's up a degree or so. You must have picked up some infection before I got you out of there." She thought a moment, then went back to the locker for some other supplies. "Here's another shot and some more blankets. Go back to sleep and let's see if that helps."

Within two hours he was tossing, trying to throw off the blankets despite the increasing cold of the shuttle. The scanner showed his temperature up again. Meg spent the rest of the day trying to keep him covered against the dropping temperatures and to see if she could lower his own fever somehow.

By the time it was dark the wind had risen alarmingly and shook the shuttle constantly. The temperature in the shuttle hit a bottom of 2°C and stayed there until Meg decided there was only one thing left to do. She crawled into bed with McCoy.

He rolled over and tried to focus his fevered eyes on her. "Just what do you think you are doing?" he asked.

"Trying to stay warm. I think the generator is going to hold out, but it isn't any too cozy in here. Your fever will at least not go to waste."

"My dear," McCoy said with a touch of his customary gallantry, "if my fever is of any use to you, I will be happy to share it."

Meg rolled over. "My turn to sleep," she said, "I'm exhausted."

For the better part of two days, Meg napped on and off, getting up only when necessary. McCoy, on the other hand, spent most of the time thinking, and what he was thinking about was Meg. He found himself thinking silly thoughts about her tiny ear, gold and winking out from the heavy masses of untidy hair no longer confined by her customary knot. It was all he could see among the mounds of blankets and clothes the two were wearing, but he'd always had a good imagination and memory. For the first time since joining the Service he started thinking the kind of thoughts that got him married the first time. "But this time it wouldn't be like that," he promised himself. "Meg's a doctor herself, and in the Service as well. All those things that were wrong before could be right this time." Gently he reached out to push the hair back from across her face.

Meg opened her eyes and smiled. "Not sleepy?"

"Not a bit," McCoy smiled back. "Busy thinking." And just then their communications board sounded.

"Damn!" McCoy exclaimed as he jumped for the switch and landed on the bad foot.

"Come in, shuttle. Any one alive down there?"

"Two of us in more or less working condition. Are we glad to see you! When can you pick us up? McCoy asked. "We're freezing."

"There's no way we can put down here," came the answer. "Can you walk out?"

"Depends on how far we have to go," McCoy said, but Meg interrupted.

"No! Besides, we need to salvage the equipment to go on with treating the tribesmen." McCoy stared at her, and she whispered at him, "Well, you can't, and I want this equipment back."

"Just a minute, I'll see what we can do." came the voice of their discoverer. There was a long pause before he came back. "We can get a sky-crane in here in a couple of hours if the weather holds. Will you be alright until then?"

"It would sure help if you can drop us a heater," McCoy replied.

"Heaters we've got. Come on out and catch it."

Meg and McCoy practically knocked each other over in their rush to get into some outdoor gear and get outside. The search craft hovered just to their left as they came out, too high to drop a line or pick up an injured person. As Meg looked up a door in the side opened and a small object with a chute was pushed out, to land in the snow about ten meters from where she stood. She ran quickly to get it, McCoy limping along slowly behind her. Together they managed to carry the thing back to the shuttle. When they got back inside the voice was asking,

"The skycrane has already left the base. We'll go on back now if you're sure you're OK."

"We're fine," Meg reassured them. Thanks for everything." The heater was already starting to work as they heard the search craft roar back across the mountains.

\* \* \* \* \*

McCoy spent the next two days in the Base hospital, not allowed to see anyone while his mangled leg was renewed. Once Meg put her head in to say "Hi", but she was off again in a moment, back to the supervision of the Pox treatment program. McCoy hoped she would meet him when he was released, but he found no one waiting and walked slowly back to his quarters alone.

He hadn't been back ten minutes when a very angry Rob Jon Callahan burst into the room. He was waving a piece of paper, fire in his eyes. "You actually reported me for not going! Lee, how could you do that to me? Do you know how long we have been friends?"

"Of course I know, Rob," McCoy said tiredly. "Since we were about six or seven years old."

"I thought I could trust you not to do this kind of thing to me." Rob complained, clearly seeing he was in the right.

"And I thought I could trust you," McCoy burst out. "The first time I ever had to command you, and you didn't accept it. I could have asked you then how you could do that to me, but I didn't. If I put in my report what you really did, refusing a direct command, they'd have roasted you." It hurt to have Rob so angry at him and so unjustly.

"They have roasted me, damn it. I'm being given a ground assignment with a survey crew. It could take two years. Where is my promotion in that, Lee? How is that going to look on my record?" Rob came up to him and grabbed his arm. "You don't know what friendship means, Leonard McCoy. I hope never to see you again."

"If that's the way you want it, Rob."

"I do. I'm being picked up tonight by the Comet Finder. I may serve out the rest of my current tour of duty and quit. You've sure messed me up." And Rob left without saying goodbye.

McCoy sank heavily into the nearest chair. What could I have done? he thought. Is there anything else I should have done? If I'd reported it in full, they'd have courtmartialed him; but I couldn't let it drop, not and respect myself. For a long time he sat alone, thinking. Then he rose and shook off the memory of Rob Jon. I'll go see Meg, he decided. She will understand.

McCoy knocked on Meg's door with a certain amount of fear and trembling. This is silly, he told himself, but it didn't help the tension in the pit of his stomach or his sweating hands.

Meg opened the door. "Why, good evening, Lee. I'm so glad to see you on your feet."

"Hi. Mind if I come in?" McCoy asked.

"Sure, I was only catching up on my correspondence. Those weeks in the mountains put me out of touch with everyone." She turned and led the way in her quarters, and McCoy's eyes followed her movements, supremely conscious of the way

she walked in the long shimmering gown she was wearing. With a single graceful movement, Meg swept together all the cassettes and fax-sheets that littered her sofa. "Please, sit down," she said.

"You shouldn't be writing letters on a night like this. Why don't you get dressed and come have some supper with me. I got new orders this afternoon, and I'll be leaving soon. We've had so little time to get to know each other." McCoy sat down and looked back up at her with a smile.

Meg stood very still for a moment, then slowly sat down beside him. "I think it might be better if we talk, Lee." She was looking intently at her hands, and McCoy felt a sudden stab of alarm. "I guess you've never looked at my record or talked to anyone about me, have you?"

"Like you said, we've been busy lately. Should I have?"

"Yes, Lee. I'm married."

McCoy waited for her to go on, but Meg didn't say anything. Instead she stood up and walked over to her window. "What am I supposed to say to that?" he asked. "There are all kinds of marriages, and I know you are in love with me."

"Oh, Lee!" Meg turned back to him, hands out in front of her in a gesture of despair. "I've tried so hard to stop it, but I can't. If Carlos were here instead of off on the Potemkin maybe I could have stopped it. I love him and I want to stay married to him."

McCoy stepped up to her and grabbed her shoulders roughly. "I want you, Meg. Can you say you don't want me?"

"I do want you. If you ever kissed me, I think I would go up like fire. But I won't let it happen." She pulled herself away and stepped back, panting. "I am not the kind of woman who can love in two places at once. Carlos has to have my first loyalty. What have I ever done to encourage you?"

"Just exist." McCoy felt his heart starting to turn to stone within his chest. "We've been friends, from the very beginning. You're exactly the kind of woman I need."

"Can't we still stay friends?" Meg asked.

McCoy shook his head. "Could I stay around you loving you as I do, knowing you could love me too if you would only let yourself? It would never work." McCoy went over to the door to let himself out. "Goodbye, Meg."

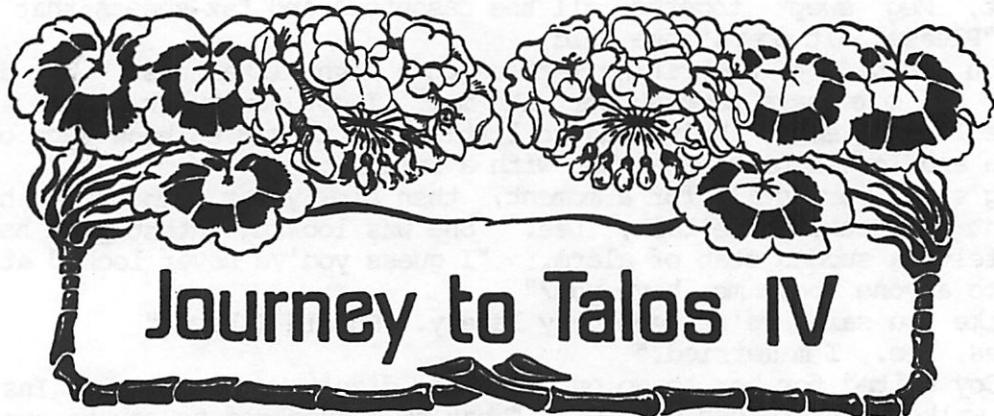
Meg stood where he left her, frozen in place. "Goodbye, Lee."

The only time McCoy never took a drink was to drown his sorrows. Instead he spent the rest of the evening walking aimlessly around the base. "Goddam planet," he thought repeatedly. "Gives me command I don't want, ruins my leg, ends my oldest friendship, and won't let go of the most desirable woman I've met in years." He looked up into the stars, seeing himself among them again. "When I get out of here," he decided, "I'm never going to love anyone again." Towards dawn and exhausted, he finally turned back to his quarters. "That's it," he repeated, "I'm never going to love anyone again."

Slowly he walked down the corridor and activated the lock to his room. There on the desk where he had dropped them as Rob came in were his new duty orders. "Chief Medical Officer," he read again. "I should be pleased that some good has come out of this rotten assignment. That ship couldn't come too soon for me. What's her name?" He scanned quickly to the bottom of the form: "The Enterprise. It may prove interesting. Chief Medical Officer on the Enterprise."

McCoy turned out the light and went to sleep.





Commander Spock, first officer of the starship Enterprise, lay on his bunk in the brig and contemplated the ceiling. It was a very illogical ceiling, with small holes irregularly placed in square tiles of approximately twenty-five centimeters on a side. For a short time he calculated how many of these holes there were in the brig. It took him 43.7 seconds to determine that there were 9692.45 holes, allowing for the ones that had been cut in half when some of the tiles had been trimmed to fit the room. How illogical of humans, he thought, not to have standard sizes of rooms and tiles so that trimming would not be necessary. It was a waste of materials and human energy.

Imperceptibly Spock sighed and closed his eyes. It was not proving as easy as he might wish to compose his mind. In Vulcan fashion he began to try to isolate the cause in order to eliminate it.

There was no doubt in his mind that what he was doing for Commodore Christopher Pike was entirely logical, and therefore right. From the first moment that he had heard of the accident on the training ship and the severe radiation poisoning Pike had sustained, Spock had known what the only logical solution to the problem could be. Seeing Pike at Starbase 11 had only served to strengthen Spock's resolve. It was only a minor inconvenience that this solution happened to be illegal, one of the few crimes in the Federation which still demanded the death penalty. However, due to the determination of his current captain, James T. Kirk, Spock found himself in the brig, his mind strangely agitated.

"Spock?" The rough voice of the Chief Medical Officer broke into his reverie, and Spock opened his eyes.

"Yes, Doctor?"

The energy bar in the door disappeared, and McCoy came into the cell. He looked down at Spock, dislike only slightly concealed in his bright blue eyes.

"I'm here to examine you. Captain's orders."

"Examine me?" Spock raised an eyebrow in question and sat up to face the doctor. "I am in no need of a physical examination."

McCoy set down his medi-kit and pulled up the stool from the table. "Mental. The captain thinks there has to be some explanation for your strange behavior lately. He's willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, to see if there is something to save you from yourself." For a while there was only the unobtrusive hum of the scanners as McCoy ran his tests.

"I assure you, doctor, you will find no evidence of mental aberration. I am quite in control of my actions, which are perfectly logical under the circumstances."

"Then why don't you explain?" McCoy cried, a combination of anger and puzzlement on his face. "Do you have any idea of what this is doing to Jim?"

Spock looked at him mildly. "The testimony at the hearing is my explanation. Unfortunately, it depends on factors outside myself."

"You started this whole thing. Are you saying now you aren't in control?"

"The sequence of events must be followed in its proper order. There is no need to change anything at this time. It will all be clear soon." Spock considered the conversation at an end and lay back, closing his eyes.

McCoy shook him hard. "I'm not done talking to you yet."

Seizing the hand that shook him, Spock forced McCoy away and back to his seat. "Do not do that again."

"I am the Senior Medical Officer on this ship, and you will answer my questions." McCoy was emphatic, and Spock accepted the inevitable with a small nod. "Now, correct me if I'm wrong, I'm not too up on Spock psychology."

Spock resisted the impulse to say, "Naturally." The doctor was trying to help, and the anger and dislike in his eyes had been replaced by concern. It surprised Spock that the concern was for himself as much as for Kirk.

"It has always been my understanding that a Vulcan does not break an oath and that his commander officer is due his utmost loyalty." Spock nodded. "Then how do you explain your disregard for your Starfleet oath and your direct disobedience to Captain Kirk's orders? You have virtually stolen the Enterprise, refusing to release your computer lock on navigation; you abandoned Kirk at the starbase, where you also disrupted their communications operation; you are up on charges of mutiny; and if we reach Talos IV as expected in a few short hours, you will die and Kirk will lose his command."

"A very concise description, Doctor McCoy. I commend you." Spock regarded McCoy thoughtfully. For the first time he was seeing that this emotional Human he had given little thought to before was, perhaps, logical and intelligent in his own way.

"You're evading my question."

"Very well. Your questions are valid, and I have considered them myself previously. The answer is that there are higher loyalties, and that if there is a conflict, the one with the higher moral claim must be met. I still have an obligation to Commodore Pike, the more so since he is now totally helpless. He is the only other captain I have served in eleven years, and he recommended me for my promotion to first officer. If there is anything I can do to aid him in his present circumstances, it is my duty to see that it is done."

McCoy cried out in despair, "But he doesn't want it, Spock! He sits there and signals 'no' for hours at a time. With the terrible price you must pay to aid him, can you justify giving him what he doesn't want?"

"He knows I am right," Spock said coldly. "There is no other solution for him outside of death. When the time comes, he will accept it."

"And what will Jim do?" McCoy stood up slowly, back bent. "You've ruined his life; I suppose you know that."

"I tried to leave him behind at the Starbase! He insisted on following us here," Spock burst out angrily. With a slight effort he brought himself into control under the doctor's startled gaze. "However, if all goes as I expect, he will not suffer."

"And if not?"

"Then I shall do whatever is necessary to discharge my obligation to him."

"Can you give back the Enterprise if you're dead?" McCoy asked bitterly. "Well, I've got my answer for Jim. There is nothing wrong with you that I can verify. You haven't gone stark raving mad, as he put it. Your readings are all normal, and your explanation is intelligent even if it isn't logical."

"It is certainly logical."

"Like hell."

"When the hearing is resumed, you will see the rest of the data. Then you will know." Spock wanted McCoy to understand that, to tell Jim that his reasons were to

aid Pike, not because he was any less loyal to his present captain.

McCoy turned to the door without speaking. "Guard." The bars disappeared, and McCoy left.

Fatigued from fighting the emotion McCoy had discharged in the room, Spock once again leaned back and closed his eyes. His mind, however, was no longer on Christopher Pike. His talk with McCoy had clarified for him what the isolated factor was that had been disturbing him. It was Jim Kirk.

Spock had not served for very long with Captain Kirk, less than a year, and it had taken him a while to adjust to the methods of command of his new superior. Rather to his own astonishment, Spock had come to the realization that he liked Jim Kirk; and he had fought this knowledge in himself, reminding himself that a Vulcan serves loyally and does his duty. He does not need friends. However, Jim Kirk was not a Vulcan and had quite soon made it clear to Spock that he considered his first officer as much a companion as a subordinate. Spock had tried not to respond to this, but it was growing more difficult as the two came to know each other better.

When Spock had completed his testimony in the briefing room the day before, he had wanted to talk to his captain, ask for his understanding, or at least his acceptance. But it had been too much for Kirk to take on faith. Disillusionment in his eyes, so angry that Spock did not even need to touch the captain to feel his emotion, Kirk had refused to listen.

"Do not stop me. Do not let them stop me," Spock said finally.

Jim looked away. "Lock him up," he said to the guards, his voice so bitter that it pierced Spock's Vulcan armor and hurt.

So that was the disturbing element. Spock had thought he knew Kirk and what to expect, and he thought he knew his own reaction to whatever Kirk could say. Spock had been wrong. Kirk trusted him and depended on him more than he had calculated, and Kirk's hurt at being what he saw as abandoned by Spock preyed on his mind. Unable to meet this with his usual understanding, Spock was beginning to regret that he had taken this action.

Eventually it came time to return to the briefing room and resume the hearing. As Spock came in he immediately looked to Kirk, and for a brief moment their eyes met. Jim smiled a tiny smile that didn't touch his eyes. Then he shrugged a little in resignation conceding that Spock had won, and he looked away. Spock resumed his seat, a little shaken. Next to Kirk Pike was still signaling "no" from his confining support chair. Was McCoy right? Could he really justify what he was doing on the grounds that it was what Pike needed? Or were the means too terrible for any end to justify them?

-It will be all right, Spock.- It was the voice from Talos, the one he had somehow contacted to initiate this incident.

-How can you be sure?- His own sureness was disappearing rapidly.

-They are receiving us at Starfleet Command, and Commodore Mendez is aware of the entire situation. He is even aware that his simulacra is here in his stead, and he is trying to contact the Enterprise. Of course, we cannot allow that yet, but we shall permit the transmission when the testimony is finished.-

-Have you spoken with Commodore Pike?-

-Yes. He is now willing. Vina has spoken with him. Begin your testimony again, and we will continue the transmission.-

The rest of the story of Talos IV was continued. The day before, Spock had watched his younger self beside Captain Pike explore a new planet, find Vina and her companions, saw his own efforts at rescuing Pike when he was mysteriously captured. Now he saw what had happened to Pike and how Pike had learned the terrible secret of Talos IV. The Talosians had an amazing power of illusion which took the place of reality for them. It was impossible for even a Vulcan to withstand this mind power or to know that it was affecting him. Eventually the Enterprise, then Pike's ship, had left Talos. On Pike's recommendation Starfleet Command had created General Order Seven, which made contacting Talos a capital offense.

As the scenes continued, Spock could see that Kirk was beginning to realize what all this was leading to. Vina was revealed as an old woman, bent and deformed,

who chose to accept the illusion rather than reality, the illusion that Pike had remained when he actually chose to leave. Kirk gave a start seeing Pike walk behind Vina back to the Talosian cave, and he turned to look at the real Pike, injured and broken beside him. The live eyes looked out from the destroyed body, and the signal board was no longer saying "no".

Finally the Talosians themselves appeared on the screen. They would care for Pike, give him the illusions that he needed to get outside his own mind and do the only living possible for him.

"Is this what you want, Chris?" Kirk asked gently. "Should we take you down to Talos IV?"

This time, Pike signaled "yes".

Eventually McCoy and the others disappeared with Pike, and Spock was left alone with Kirk in the briefing room.

"Is my explanation satisfactory?" Spock asked. He had to know.

Kirk turned to him with a crooked smile. "Of course. I wish I'd had the faith in you to trust you as you deserve - I should have known! Why didn't you tell me before? I'd have helped."

"I considered it briefly; but you did not have the experience with Talos IV that I did, and I could not take the chance. In addition, if anything did go wrong, the responsibility had to be mine alone." For the first time in days Spock could breathe without the tightness in his chest that had been so annoying.

Kirk grinned. "Very well, Spock. However, we're going to have to do something about this unfortunate tendency to emotion you have been displaying lately."

"Captain!" Spock said, feigning shock. Inwardly, though, he was pleased that Kirk could see into him so clearly and still be his friend.

Suddenly the scene on the viewscreen returned. For a brief moment they watched as Pike and Vina went together once again into the Talosian cave.

"This time it's for real, and I still can't believe it. Even though I know it's an illusion to see them like that, I hope it will make Chris happy."

"It was the only way."

Kirk just smiled. "Well, I guess it's time to get back to work. We've lost some time these last few days, and there are things to be done. Coming, Mister Spock?"

"Momentarily, Captain." Kirk left, and Spock was alone. He knew now that Kirk was going to be his friend more than Pike had even been, and the thought was agreeable. Kirk would have all his loyalty in the future. Spock drew himself together and followed his captain back to work.





"Flawlessly logical," Spock said, giving her his first full attention in years. Her eyes turned aside. T'Pring replied, "I am honored." Inside, however, she was crying, lies, all lies. It was not logic at all; the entire issue had been caused by her own inability to accept with logic what must be. Behind Spock and out of her line of sight, T'Pring could hear the odd buzzing sound produced by the transporter effect. Spock stiffened, and T'Pring felt the distress the sound caused him. Doctor McCoy was returning to the starship with Captain Kirk's body. Looking back to Spock, T'Pring was caught by the sheer agony she met in his eyes...

\* \* \* \* \*

. . . and remembered the first time she saw those same eyes.

It had been a beautiful month of Tasmeen, the storms of the cooler months having abated, the hot oppressiveness of the dry season not yet upon them. In a garden in the Vulcan city of ShiKahr, a young girl played alone with her toys. A sound from the top of the high garden wall made her look up to see a boy climbing down from the top.

"Who are you?" T'Pring demanded. "What do you want?"

"I am Spock," he answered, as though that should tell her something.

It did not. She looked at him thoughtfully. Spock seemed about her own age, though taller and as skinny as a venger. Despite having scrambled over the tree-high wall, he was still neat, his clean robe just touching the tops of his unscuffed boots. Spock came towards her through the plants against the wall without leaving any sign of his passage.

"I know you," she said at last. "I have seen you at the Academy."

Spock nodded. "I have seen you as well. I wanted to find out what you are like. My father says we are going to be married."

"I have not been told that anything had been confirmed." Indeed, Spock's name had not been mentioned, only "the son of Sarek." The night before, her parents had been discussing the matter, unable to determine why Sarek was reluctant to confirm the bonding. T'Pring was intelligent and healthy, and their family was influential. True, Sarek's family was more powerful, but there were not many girls who were of Spock's age and considered appropriate. Some of those who were apparently objected to Spock's mixed human/Vulcan heritage.

"My father told me this morning. As soon as we have completed the Kahswan Ordeal next week, the ceremony will take place." Spock looked at her a little curiously. "Do you know anything about the Bonding Ceremony?"

"No, I do not. Mother says it is more important to concentrate on the Ordeal for the moment with nothing else to distract me." T'Pring put down the doll she was

holding and went to sit on the bench under the Keva tree.

"What is that?" Spock asked as he sat down next to her. His legs reached the ground as hers did not.

"Do you always want to find out about everything?" T'Pring asked back.

"It is the best way to learn."

"That is my doll." She forestalled the next question she saw on his face, adding quickly, "A doll teaches children intelligent infant care and reinforces proper parental habits." At least, that was what her mother said. All T'Pring knew was that she had a friend in that doll and with it she was never alone.

Spock dismissed the doll. "Do you want to go exploring in the desert?" he asked.

"I am only allowed on the desert with my instructors."

"I am older than you and I shall take care of you." Spock seemed to consider the matter settled. He reached up and pulled down some of the purple keva fruit. "Let us take these along in case we get hungry. I want to show you a place I know."

T'Pring was not dressed for desert walks, but this boy was beginning to intrigue her. Stonn, for example, would never have asked her to disobey her parents. He knew perfectly well she should not leave without an adult. "I shall come," T'Pring decided, partly because she looked forward to exploring the desert, partly because Spock was so interesting.

Spock packed the kevas carefully in his hood. "I go out there all the time. Why are you not allowed to do so?"

Another question, this time one she could not answer. "Mother is very cautious about my safety. She does not explain her reasons."

"But you can find out if you try hard enough." Spock looked over at the gate. "Is that why the gate is barred?"

"Yes. We are close enough to the edge of the city that animals have been attracted to the garden, apparently for the water. Large animals make Mother nervous."

"Then we shall go the way I came in. Can you climb in those clothes?" He looked skeptically at her dress.

"If you assist me."

They scrambled over the wall and onto the desert side of the house. T'Pring looked ruefully at her dress, which was dirtied and torn already, and envied Spock his desert robe of sturdy fiber. "Your robe is very practical," she said as they walked out across the sand."

"Indeed. My mother made it for me. She says making things with her hands is a beneficial way to relax her mind from her work at the Academy." Spock's mind was on their expedition. "First I shall tell you how to find you way across the desert from here. Do you see those twin peaks in the distant mountains?" T'Pring nodded. "We walk in line with them until we reach the first dry wash. If you get tired of walking, be sure to tell me, since you are not as used to this as I am."

"I am well trained in desert techniques, Spock," T'Pring retorted. She resented his attitude towards her. Her education had been as complete as any Vulcan child's.

For over an hour, T'Pring and Spock walked in line with the twin peaks. T'Pring did not tire, but their progress was not steady. All along the way there were interesting things to see, things that her teachers had not taken the time to watch properly, to T'Pring's way of thinking.

First they lay on their stomachs and watched a town of small rodents, tiny things with a yip-yip cry who lived in tunnels burrowed deep in the sand. The two children crept up on these quietly, not alarming the sentries that Spock pointed out to T'Pring on the outermost edges of the settlement.

Next Spock showed her a small stand of Red Dagger Cactus, slightly out of the line of the walk and hidden in a gully. "I know about those," T'Pring informed him. "They are in my biology text." She did not tell him that she had never seen one or that her teacher thought the only stand in the area was twenty-five kilometers in the opposite direction.

Then followed a succession of smaller things: sand crabs, insect hills, night

blooming Kolens shut tight against the light of the sun. "These will open if they are shaded," Spock told her and patiently held the hem of his robe over one until the tight copper-colored leaves parted to show the brilliant orange flower inside. Just as patiently, he slowly drew away the robe, letting tiny amounts of light fall on the flower over several minutes until the leaves were once again folded shut. "If the sun hits them directly, the flower will die," he explained. T'Pring was fascinated. She had not studied the Kolens as yet, for they were not a survival necessity. They were only beautiful.

Upon reaching the first gully, Spock and T'Pring turned left to walk towards the east. This disclosed new treasures, new discoveries. Tightly shut mud-wader traps, the tiny animals waiting inside for a flash flood; heavy boulders worn smooth by the force of those floods or carried to improbable locations by the flood force; tracks of the le-matya embedded in the mud hardened along the banks.

"Why do you come here so often?" T'Pring asked as they crawled over the rocks and boulders against the shady side of the gully.

"It is something interesting to do. Father will not allow me to stay indoors working at my studies all the time. I find it diverting to explore and see the things I have studied in school.

"What is your preferred study?"

"Computers!" he said promptly.

"That is not a study, that is a technique," T'Pring said scornfully.

"I study it. I know all about the less complex ones, and I have started work with the older, more advanced students." His thin cheeks flushed with pride, but T'Pring did not comment on that. This odd boy actually liked to study. "What is your preference?" he asked.

"None of them interests me more than the others," she was forced to admit. For the first time she saw this as a fault.

Fortunately Spock's attention was captured by something else. "Here is where we start to climb," he said abruptly.

Struggling through the rock on the gully wall, they climbed towards the high bank. Near the top was a dark depression that led back into the side of the gully. Spock disappeared into it, and she could hear him call, "Come up after me."

With difficulty T'Pring made the last pull up to the opening and stepped in hesitantly after Spock. "Where are you?"

"Here." A light flared beside her as Spock lit a torch he had pulled from behind a rock. "What do you think?"

As the light increased and filled the cave, T'Pring looked around slowly. It was not very deep, carved from the solid rock. Apparently it was the result of years of slow erosion, forming from a tiny spring. At the back a small pool of water glistened.

"It is fascinating. How did you find it?"

"I saw animal tracks once, after a flood. When I looked in I saw the water and knew why they came here. It is safe. The animals come only at night."

"I appreciate the opportunity to see it," T'Pring said. She knelt down by the pool and took a handful of rocks from the bottom. They reflected the light of the torch like gems.

"I never brought anyone here before; but I thought if we are going to be married, you would find it interesting." Spock pulled out a mat and sat down. "Would you like one of the kevas?" he asked. Carefully he brought them out of his hood, neither one so much as bruised from the long hike.

T'Pring sat down beside him. "Thank you, I would. We must not stay long, however. My mother will be wondering where I am." In fact, her mother always acted as if she thought T'Pring would be eaten by a le-matya if she as much as stepped out the door.

"My mother is never concerned with where I am," Spock said, with the nonchalance of a boy who feels he has a proper mother. "She knows I can take care of myself."

"When we are married, may I come with you all the time?" T'Pring asked. It

sounded desirable to be able to be all on one's own like that.

"Not all the time, but sometimes." Spock rolled over on his stomach and looked at her thoughtfully. "I wonder why we have to get married."

T'Pring shook her head. "Another thing adults do not explain."

"There are no unmarried Vulcans; did you know that? I want to know why. After the Ordeal next week, I think I shall try to find out."

"That will be difficult. No one will answer my questions."

"I shall think of something. Perhaps I shall ask the computer how to find out." Spock's eyes were half closed, considering.

T'Pring finished the keva and held the stone out to Spock. "It is time to leave. Do you take the stones back or leave them here?"

"I take them." They both rose and began to prepare for the walk back to ShiKahr.

The return walk was accomplished without any of the little side trips and discoveries of the walk out, but they had been gone nearly four hours when they came in sight of T'Pring's home. The sun was low in the sky.

"I shall go with you, in case you need help getting back over the wall," Spock offered.

"My mother has undoubtedly returned. I shall go to the main gate."

The question was rendered academic by the sight of her father coming quickly towards them from the house.

"Where have you been?" Snurr demanded.

Spock spoke up. "I took T'Pring out to see some interesting desert specimens."

The older man looked at him coldly. "T'Pring is not allowed in the desert unsupervised." He did not seem to recognize Spock.

"T'Pring was supervised, sir. She was with me." Spock was behaving respectfully, but T'Pring thought she could detect an odd note in his voice. He knew perfectly well that he was trying to get by on a logical flaw.

"Spock is very familiar with the desert, Father," T'Pring put in. "His father allows him to investigate it on his own."

Snurr looked at Spock, a new light in his eyes. "You are Spock, son of Sarek?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Then I shall return to your home with you and discuss this with your father. We can not have a repetition of this incident. T'Pring, you may go in to your mother and explain your absence, and that I have gone with Spock."

T'Pring left obediently, knowing it was no use to argue with her father when he spoke in that manner. Usually she could persuade him to do as she wanted, but somehow this was different. She last saw Spock standing by her father, looking very young and alone in his independence.

Three weeks passed, during which T'Pring was fully occupied. With the date of the Kahswan Ordeal drawing nearer, it was necessary to put all her effort into preparing to pass it successfully. There was no stigma attached to failure, unless of course a child died because of some error in judgment. However, successful completion meant a child was now considered an adult, and T'Pring was eager to have this status for herself. She did not have a chance to speak to Spock, but late one evening she heard her father tell her mother that Spock has passed his Ordeal. At school she heard another story, how Spock had broken the rules to save another boy's life. It seemed odd to her, but the Guardians had apparently approved. They had declared that the cause was sufficient and had passed him.

The next week T'Pring successfully met all her tests. Pleased with her new position in life, she barely noticed that all her toys were packed up and sent to a cousin who had just borne a girl child.

No preparations for the Bonding Ceremony could take place until after the Ordeal had passed. T'Pring now began to learn the words of the Ritual and the new standards of behavior she was expected to follow. She even received a new wardrobe. Her childhood days were over, and this would be emphasized by the completion of the Bonding Ceremony.

The morning set aside for the Bonding dawned hot and clear. The brilliant sun shone down on the garden of T'Pau's home where the families of both children met. Dressed in her first adult dress, T'Pring took her place before T'Pau in the center of the paved area, while Spock stood to one side. She tried to catch his eye while the adults went through the formalities, but he would not look at her. His expression was severe in the extreme.

Finally T'Pau turned her attention to the children. The ceremony was quite brief, but the skilled hand of an experienced telepath was necessary to reach into the two young minds and find the link that would bind them together.

T'Pau laid her hands on their heads, right on T'Pring and left on Spock. Speaking the words of the ritual, she led T'Pring into the first series of responses. T'Pring had to turn to face Spock, and he turned to her as he answered. He still did not meet her eyes. When her mother had taught them to her, T'Pring had thought the words a little silly. What kind of logic was "never and always touching and touched"? As the Matriarch drew away her hands, T'Pring knew. Somewhere in her mind was a little piece of Spock, an awareness of him and his moods. She knew for certain that he resented this intrusion into his mind, that he was disturbed that she had not spoken to him after the Ordeal, that he had found out what being married meant and he was not going to tell her.

That disturbed her. She wondered that her parents could force her into this Bonding if it could only lead to something so terrible. A little frightened and resentful of Spock's attitude, T'Pring drew back into herself. Both children stood rigid and alone as the Matriarch finished. With relief, T'Pring went home with her parents, and Spock went his way with his family.

Spock and T'Pring would not finalize their marriage for many years yet as customarily the marriage ceremony did not take place until after the male had reached sexual Awakening. Under ordinary circumstances bonded young people were provided opportunities to get to know each other, though closeness was not encouraged. For Spock and T'Pring, even such acceptable opportunities were very scarce. They attended different classes and T'Pring was often away from the school. Her father traveled a great deal in his work and often took his family with him. The reserved attitude Spock had presented to her at the Bonding Ceremony made T'Pring reluctant to initiate any additional acquaintance, and their contacts became short and far apart.

T'Pring did not forget Spock, the bonding kept him ever present in her mind. However, she learned to ignore him in her daily life, to adapt to his presence. Spock was a thought of the future, not real in her everyday life of study and travel.

When T'Pring entered secondary school, one of the required subjects for all students was a course in parenting. Children are valued and wanted on Vulcan, and much thought is given to their care. T'Pring found in this course and the opportunities she had from it to be with small children the preference in subject matter that she had never discovered before. She and her friends spent much time thinking about children and looking forward to the day when they too might be able to start their families. It was one topic of conversation that was likely to come up at any gathering T'Pring attended.

One day, however, T'Kren put a new element into the conversation when she asked, "Do you think you and Spock will be the first of us to have children?"

The question confused T'Pring. "Why should I be? Spock is no older than the rest of us."

T'Kren lowered her voice, looking around to see if an Elder might be near to hear her. "I have been studying humans in my biology class. Did you not know that they are Awakened when they are even younger than we are now? Maybe Spock is like that, instead of like us."

T'Pring had spent enough of her life defending Spock against similar accusations. "I have been assured that Spock is totally Vulcan, in all respects."

"But you can not know it. Awakening might happen any time with him. It is not something you can identify in advance." The small group of girls drew closer. "In

fact, human girls can have babies from the age of twelve. That is why there are so many of them. They will take over the galaxy, not because they are the best race but because they are so prolific." The subject had jumped from the specific to the general, for which T'Pring was grateful. The girls began to comment on the undesirability of bearing children at too young an age. Some of them, however, had distinctly envious inflections in their voices.

What if it were true about Spock, T'Pring wondered, and for the first time began actually to see herself as a wife and mother. It intrigued her, and that night at supper she had many questions to ask her mother: how will I know when I have Awakened; what is the nature of a fertility cycle; how do I become pregnant if I so wish it. The questions were not answered.

"T'Pring, all the information you need on the topic at this time has been covered in your class work. There is no need to discuss it further."

"But I want to know. The topic is of interest to me. I am studying preprimary education, and I would like to know how soon I can expect to have children of my own."

T'Cele sighed. "You will have to wait until you marry Spock. That is still many years in the future. You have no need to think of living with him or raising a family until it is absolutely necessary."

The contradiction of desiring children and putting off marriage until it was unavoidable reminded T'Pring of something she had not thought of in years. Spock had learned that marriage was unpleasant, and he did not want it.

"Why is marriage a necessity?" T'Pring demanded.

Her mother sat absolutely motionless for a few moments. "Pon Farr makes marriage necessary," she said finally.

"Pon Farr? What is that?"

T'Cele stood up. "T'Pring, when the time comes, only then shall I discuss it with you. Until then, content yourself with your studies. If you decide to be a teacher, you will have all the children you can handle."

"Mother!"

"The topic is closed."

For some time afterward, T'Pring tried to follow Spock's example and find out exactly what being married and Pon Farr meant. The term itself caused her no problem. Her dictionary defined the term as being from Middle Vulcan, meaning "Time of Mating". It did not seem sufficient, rather more of a translation than a definition, and a self-evident one at that. No additional references were given. If the information was available from the school computer, she was not able to discover it. T'Pring tried all the ways she could think of to elicit new responses from the computer, but to no avail. For the first time in her life she wished she had paid more attention to her computer classes. As it was, she had only the barest of skills of using and working with the computer. Spock had been able to do more than she when he was seven. At least, he had found out the answer.

Giving up the attempt, T'Pring tried to discover the answer by observing her parents, but there seemed to be nothing secret between them. They both seemed perfectly ordinary, her mother perhaps a little more controlled and distant than her father. Despite his frequent absences, her father was closer to her than her mother and T'Pring missed him when he was gone. It occurred to her now that her mother did not seem ever to miss Snurr when he was away, in fact often seemed a little more at ease when he was absent. Reluctantly T'Pring came to the conclusion that there was something unpleasant and unknown, but that she was probably never going to find out the answer.

The answer found her, however, not long afterwards. T'Pring returned home late one evening to find her mother packed and ready to leave for a journey.

"What has happened? Is there some emergency?"

T'Cele sat her small case before the door and looked at her daughter. "Do you remember that I told you the Pon Farr makes marriage a necessity?" T'Pring nodded. "It is for this that I must join your father."

T'Pring was puzzled. "Can it not wait? Father is due to return home from

TurGahr next month when his business there is finished."

"The Pon Farr permits no waiting. You may expect me home again in about ten days. If you need anything, call your Aunt T'Larna. I shall not be available until I return." T'Cele crossed to T'Pring and touched her daughter's hands. "It is a necessity you will understand when you are older."

"Yes, Mother." T'Pring retired to her own room, disturbed by her mother's words. Even more, T'Cele's attitude was disturbing. It was surprising that T'Cele's coolness could not hide the obvious reluctance with which she faced the Pon Farr. T'Pring did not sleep well, her mind constantly turning over her small store of facts, which were beginning to be colored by fear.

It was only five days later than her mother returned. T'Pring was eating supper in the cool of the garden when the door opened and her mother joined her.

"You have returned sooner than you indicated," T'Pring said.

"T'Pring, your father is dead," T'Cele told her flatly. "He had a stroke, and the healers were unable to prevent severe damage."

"Dead! That is impossible. I do not understand. What happened?" Her father had always been there; it was impossible to believe that he should be gone.

"I am not up to discussing it with you, T'Pring." T'Cele put her hand up to her temple, obviously forcing control over herself. "Will you please call your aunt and have her come over when it is convenient. I must discuss details with her." T'Cele left T'Pring alone and puzzled.

T'Larna arrived shortly after T'Pring contacted her and went straight to T'Cele's room. T'Pring sat alone in the garden, her supper forgotten. She was trying very hard to realize that she would never see her father again. When T'Larna finally was ready to leave, T'Pring stopped her.

"T'Larna, I should like to know what happened."

Her aunt looked at her thoughtfully. "I believe you are old enough to understand. Sit down and let me explain."

Puzzled, T'Pring did as she was bid. Her aunt's first words mystified her.

"I take it, T'Pring, that you have studied Vulcan biology, specifically reproduction."

"Yes, but what..."

"Let me continue, niece. You have been told also, I am sure, that marriage is the means of insuring reproduction and a stable home life for every Vulcan child. Have you ever discussed the means necessary for the male and female to join in order to produce this child?"

"We have studied reproduction in various animals. I have assumed it is a somewhat similar process," T'Pring answered stiffly. What could be the useful purpose in discussing this? "Mother said that when the male of a bonded pair reached his Awakening, that is the time to learn more detail about reproduction."

A brief, bitter expression touched T'Larna's face. "Do you know what the nature of his Awakening might be?"

"A female's Awakening is similar in detail to a sehlat's. I was given to understand that is true also for the male. Many of us have sehlatas as pets and are familiar with the process."

"Males are more similar in actual fact to Sulek's White Wolves."

"That is not logical. The Sulek wolf has a very violent reproductive cycle. We have studied them thoroughly. Once each year the male experiences a violent urge to mate and will do so with any female in the area. There could not be the slightest similarity to a Vulcan male." All the same, T'Pring was beginning to wonder exactly why they had spent so much time studying the wolf.

T'Larna looked away and a small sigh escaped her. "The details are not exact, but the similarity exists. It is the Pon Farr, the Time of Mating. Once every seven years, beginning soon after the Awakening, a male Vulcan must mate or he will die. The bonding you and your mate have experienced means he can limit this urge to you and not every other female he can force into the act, but it cannot be suppressed. The urge is extremely violent and impersonal, and nothing has been found that will affect it. The internal forces can become so strong that a normally

healthy male may not even survive it. Your father could, perhaps, have lived for years with the stroke condition undetected. He was killed by the Pon Farr."

Her father almost forgotten, T'Pring felt her stomach heave in revolt. "Do you mean Spock will go through this and I must join him?"

"Naturally, although his Awakening is yet forty or fifty years in the future. It would have been better for you to learn this later, but the subject was unavoidable at this time." T'Larna stood up. "I must go now; there are arrangements to be made for the funeral. Do not disturb your mother yet tonight. The last five days have been extremely hard on her, and she does not need your questions. Accept what has come to pass and do not dwell on it."

As her aunt left the house, T'Pring once again escaped into the recesses of the garden. She had to move at once or be sick right there. Her mind was a turmoil, thoughts overlapping in despair, and she needed her mother.

My father was gentle and kind, she thought. How can this be true? It is animal! I refuse to believe that he could turn into a raging beast, controlled by forces so strong that they could kill him. For the first time in her adult life, T'Pring put her head down on the bench and sobbed. She was still very young, too young to understand and cope with all she had just heard. There was no one there to help her assimilate it, and eventually she stopped crying and went in to bed.

Early the next morning she was awakened by the door signal. It rang repeatedly, but her mother did not move to answer it. Realizing her mother was deep in her meditations, T'Pring pulled on a robe and hurried to answer the signal. She opened the door to see a tall, young male standing on the step.

"Are you all right?" he demanded. "What has happened?"

T'Pring stared at him. "Spock?" she questioned finally. It had been so long since she had seen him, his features were unfamiliar to her.

"It is I. Last night I felt something from you; a feeling as though you needed help. I came as quickly as I could." Spock looked disheveled, dirty, as though he had run a great distance. Behind him, however, she could see an open land speeder.

"I do not understand," T'Pring replied, puzzled. "You felt something?" She motioned him to follow her into the room.

Spock was looking at her with concern in his gaze. "You have had a great sadness. It seemed you needed someone."

"My father died yesterday. When my mother told me last evening, it distressed me. I must apologize that this feeling was so apparent to you as to cause you distress in turn." T'Pring was trying to remain calm, but his obvious concern touched her deeply. He came because she needed him.

"There is no need to apologize; the cause was sufficient." He looked at her uncomfortably, as though now he were here he did not know what to do. "I should like to be of assistance, if there is anything I can do."

"I do not know. Mother has not informed me of any arrangements as yet." As she spoke, T'Cele came into the room.

"Is there some problem?" she asked.

"Mother, this is Spock. He came to be with me."

T'Cele nodded her head slightly, apparently not surprised that Spock knew of this private matter. "It is good you are here, Spock. T'Pring will find your presence helpful, I am sure. Will you join us for breakfast?"

"Thank you, yes. I left my uncle's home this morning before first light."

"It will be brief. T'Larna will be here shortly with the Matriarch to discuss the ceremony. T'Pring, will you pick something from the garden?"

"Yes, mother." T'Pring longed to get away and be alone. Apparently her mother had adjusted to Snurr's death, but T'Pring still felt an enormous sense of loss. Part of her longed to talk to Spock about her father, tell him what her father's death meant to her, how alone and lost she would be without his guidance. Fighting this was her new awareness of what being married to Spock would mean. Her thoughts of having her own family were dulled by knowing the only way a child could be created. The childish dreams she had of sharing a home with Spock as her parents had were turning into nightmares of violence. Worst of all, there was no way she

could get out of it. All men were the same, and Spock would die without her. Perhaps not now; this was still dozens of years in the future, but she did not want it to be. Almost she put her head down on the bench again to cry.

"T'Pring?" Spock's voice came behind her. "May I help you?"

"You!" She turned on him. "You are male, just like my father. Do you know what he died of?"

"I do not." Spock raised a questioning eyebrow at her vehemence.

"The Pon Farr killed him."

Spock went totally rigid before her, and the awareness of him that she had felt strongly since his arrival decreased. "Explain."

"He had a stroke. There was nothing that could help him while he was in the Pon Farr. He died."

Neither spoke for a moment, and T'Pring silently studied him. Spock was nearly full grown, angular but not awkward, controlling his still too large hands and feet with ease. Yet there was something about him, something different from the other boys she knew. Perhaps it was his human heritage. Perhaps what T'Kren had said was true.

"Would you prefer me to leave?" Spock asked stiffly.

"No, wait. Something just occurred to me. Do you remember when we were first bonded, you said you were going to find out why we had to marry. You never would tell me why, but I know you discovered the reason and it did not please you. Is the Pon Farr what you learned?" T'Pring had to force herself to ask this, but it was suddenly the most important thing in her life. She had to know more.

"Yes. I did not understand it at the time, but it did not seem to me to be desirable."

"Did you ever wonder if it might not be true for you?"

"Of course not. I am Vulcan."

"You are also half human. Do you have not human traits at all?" Maybe if she were very lucky Spock might not be bound by the Pon Farr.

He denied it instantly. "Physically I am entirely Vulcan. A genetic scan has shown that I carry recessive human traits, but they do not affect me. There is no reason to assume I should be spared the Pon Farr." Spock's face was unmoving, his lips a thin line across clenched teeth.

T'Pring insisted. "Are you sure? I understand that human males have undergone puberty by the time they are our age. You would know by now."

"I am sure. Biologically, I am totally Vulcan."

T'Pring sat down heavily, the fear in her crushing the tiny spark of hope that had begun to grow. Spock pulled away from her, and the bond between them seemed almost to disappear. It was a release to T'Pring, who found she did not want to have anything more to do with Spock. She did not want to know this male who would someday treat her as nothing more than a method of releasing his own irrepressible desires. His gentleness and concern for her could never overcome this. It would be better not to get to know him, not to learn to respect him and value his opinion of her, and then to have to submit to his violent drives. Only if she kept him out of her life now would it be possible to live through what one day must come.

When the funeral ceremony was over, Spock returned to his family, and T'Pring did not make any effort to see him. Spock seemed to put his mind totally to his studies, and T'Pring followed his example; not because she liked to study any more than before, but because it was something to do with herself. People came to mean very little to her. The other girls, unaware of the knowledge T'Pring had gained, looked to the future with sight still undimmed. The boys revolted her. Only the tiny children of her teacher's class held her attention; for in them she saw the children of her own she now hoped never to bear. T'Pring spent her time alone or in her class. There was nothing else she wanted to do.

Eventually the day came when she finished the last course of her secondary school work. With the next term she would be starting at the Teacher's Academy, working in the experimental school attached to the Science Academy. It would be a coveted position she had worked hard to attain. Although it meant the possibility

of closer contact with Spock, who would be at the Science Academy, she had determined to allow this to make no difference in their lives.

Therefore, it was a surprise to T'Pring one day soon after graduation when Spock came to see her. She was reading alone in the garden when her mother came to find her.

"You have a visitor, T'Pring," T'Cele said.

"Who is it?" T'Pring rarely had visitors.

"Spock." Her mother looked at her questioningly. "You should be seeing him more, you know. It is good that he is here."

"I am not interested in Spock. He knows that. Did he say why he is here?" she asked as she followed her mother into the house.

"No; but he has recently finished school with high honors. You might remember to offer a word of commendation."

T'Pring said nothing of the sort to Spock. Instead she greeted him with only bare politeness, as if he were an unwelcome guest.

"Greetings, Spock. It is an unexpected occurrence to see you here.

His answer to her reflected the coolness she presented. "I do not wish to intrude on your privacy. However, I have recently made a decision which concerns you. I have decided to apply for acceptance at the Starfleet Academy."

"Why?" she demanded, stunned by the implications. "Can you not do the same work at the Science Academy?"

Spock's face took on a rigid look she did not understand; he looked obstinate. "Starfleet Academy is the best place in the Federation to study computers and physics, particularly for practical applications. In addition, the off-world contacts should be stimulating."

"Why did you not discuss it with me in advance? I shall be expected to go with you, if not now, then in the future. I have no desire to go off-world, Spock. Do not expect me to come with you."

Spock met her eyes steadily. "For some time I have known exactly what to expect from you, T'Pring. However, whether or not you choose to go with me can not alter my decision. You are my bond-mate, and as such are bound to go with me after we finally marry. Until then you are free to choose your own way of life, but I had considered that you might see the wisdom in joining me now. Starfleet Academy has its own school for the young children of Starfleet officers; it might be a valuable experience for you."

"I will never go off-world, so I see no purpose in learning to teach non-Vulcans. I have a good position here that I do not intend to abandon." T'Pring looked at him, wondering what had caused him to make this amazing choice. It was another sign of how weak their bond had become that she did not know within herself what his motivation was. However, it made her future easier to contemplate if she knew she would rarely see him.

"Then there is nothing else to be said. I shall write to you regularly and inform you of my progress. I shall expect a similar courtesy from you." Spock turned to leave. For one intense moment T'Pring received a feeling of loneliness from him, a feeling of fighting against the world for what he wanted. He had wished to find her willing to join him and had found only rejection. She had a brief desire to reach out to him, and she followed him to the main entrance.

"I shall write," she said. "We should remain informed about each other's progress and way of life. May your studies prove rewarding."

Spock turned back to her, a question in his eyes and upraised eyebrows at her unexpected consideration. For a moment it hung on the balance, and she almost agreed to go with him. Off world, things might be different. Then she remembered her aunt's words, "Nothing will affect the Pon Farr." The resolution to have as little to do with him as possible came back in full force. No, she would never allow him any power over her. He could die in space, and she would never care that he did.

"Goodbye, Spock," she said firmly.

"Goodbye, T'Pring." He was gone.

That was the last time she saw Spock for many years. On his brief returns to Vulcan he did not even come across town to her house. From his letters she learned that he did well at the Academy, that he decided after the completion of his studies that he would go for an initial tour of duty in Starfleet. She did not learn from him, however, that his father did not approve of his choice of career when he remained in Starfleet after his first tour of duty. That she learned much later through friends.

Years passed, eighteen long years. Spock's letters grew briefer and less personal. Much of what she knew about him came second hand: news reports, friends who knew him in Starfleet. It almost passed from her mind that one day he would Awaken and come to claim her. He did not die in space, but he was so far away that he was dead to her. There was no touch of him in her mind.

In spite of her forgetting, the essential touch between them did not disappear. Unexpectedly at age 35 T'Pring reached her own Awakening. At first it seemed merely an inconvenience, a biological fact of life she must learn to live with and regret that it began too early for her when others, particularly males, normally reached it at a much more advanced age. Then she began to dream, waking at night, her body hot and trembling, her mind confused by images of fire and death mixed with sexual desire. They frightened her, and she had to force her mind not to dwell on them.

It took her some time to realize that she was being affected externally. Spock, too, had Awakened, years ahead of schedule. Not only this, but he was coming quickly into the first stages of the intense desire of the Pon Farr. Somehow, shortly, he would be coming to claim her. When she realized this, T'Pring grew weak from the thought. It had not gone away, despite her vehement denial of it for so many years. Much sooner than she had feared, she was going to have to give in to him, be raped by this man she did not want even to touch her.

Ever since her own Awakening, T'Pring had been reading, studying, trying to find a way out of her situation. There was now so little time and no chance at all to break the bonding without once having to submit to Spock. In desperation T'Pring remembered that long ago there had been a way to prevent a marriage to one who was undesirable: Kah-if-farr, the Challenge. With difficulty, T'Pring located the references to it and searched out the details. There in her books, written out with the smug assurance that no modern Vulcan woman would ever want to use this ritual, she found the description. T'Pring almost allowed a smile of satisfaction to touch her face as she read it over. She would learn and she would use it.

T'Pring found that she would need a Champion, and it did not take much thought to decide who she would use. Stonn would be the male who would fight Spock for her possession. He had always desired her, for her beauty and the quick mind that he did not possess. Never would he take advantage of her becoming his property. Nor had he yet Awakened. As he was of the same age as she and Spock, it could be twenty years before she would have to submit to him. That alone could be worth the consequences of breaking Tradition.

As she considered the matter thoroughly, it occurred to her that Stonn might not win. Spock was strong and a Starfleet officer, and then he would still need her. However, Spock was proud, for himself and his family. He would release her since she had dared to challenge, and her problem would be solved. To be used by him the once was the price she would have to pay for ultimate freedom.

Perhaps she could make it more sure. Spock was allowed to have his two closest companions with him for the ceremony. One of them might be useful, if he looked strong and healthy. Spock in Pon Farr might be easy to defeat, but it was uncertain, and she did not know much about Stonn's ability to fight with the lirpa. If she chose Spock's friend and he won, he would not want her. If Spock won, he would release her because of the challenge. This version had the added advantage of eliminating Stonn altogether. Freedom once again.

It was late when T'Pring completed her plan and put away her books, but she was not sleepy. Her mind seemed alive to the influences of Spock's distant mind touch. Her body seemed to feel every line of her clothing; the lights in her room had grown more brilliant. She began to wonder what it might be like, just once to have a

male's hands caress her, to touch her in such a way that she wanted to respond to the passion his body felt. T'Pring leaned back in her chair with closed eyes, visualizing what might be possible, and she almost hoped that Spock would win.

What am I thinking? She grew sick at her own thoughts. It is not Vulcan to be concerned with these things. This act is necessary only to produce children. It becomes an emotional excess otherwise. How can I even think that such behavior is desirable, when it is so degrading? I am not an animal. T'Pring rose and began to prepare for bed, denying the sensations that her mind and body were feeling. I will not allow my mind to dwell on this. My years of torture will soon be ended, and that is what I must think of. That is all.

Uncertain of how much time remained before Spock would return to Vulcan, T'Pring sought out Stonn the next day. She came to his office in the afternoon when her students had left for home. He was almost pathetically glad to see her, tripping over a chair as he rose to greet her.

"T'Pring, it is an honor to have you here." He was like a young sehlat, panting and eager to please.

T'Pring put on her softest manner and bit back the stinging comment she might ordinarily have made. Why did his ears have to stick out so? "It has been too long since we have seen each other. I thought that if you are not too busy you might join me for dinner." Really, this was almost too easy.

Stonn continued to look like a baby sehlat. "I am never too busy to see you. Would you like to leave now? My assistant can close up the office." Tripping over a small table, he led her out of the office.

After stifling a comment to the effect that Stonn ought to clear out some of the clutter in his office since he was clumsy, T'Pring led the conversation along conventional lines. Her work, his work, their families were discussed in detail until the savory at the end of the meal was finished. In the dark cool of the evening, they walked to the park and found a secluded seat near a tiny fountain.

T'Pring steadied herself and began. "Stonn, you know, of course, that my bond-mate is Spock, son of Sarek."

He nodded. "It seems I hear of him often lately. The exploits of the Enterprise are becoming a legend here. Spock's name figures prominently in the news reports. It is quite an honor for Vulcan."

"It is an honor I do not seek for myself."

Stonn raised an eyebrow in question. "Explain."

"When Spock and I were bonded, my family was assured that he was Vulcan in all respects. However, in the reports I read of his behavior, it comes to me to wonder if it can be true. Could a Vulcan actually live with humans for so long, do many of the things that are reported?" T'Pring did not lie as she said these things; they had crossed her mind on many occasions. They were simply secondary to her primary motivation. Very deliberately she laid her hand on Stonn's knee. He went rigid with the effort of controlling his surprise. "As you may not know, I am now at an age when a woman begins to think seriously of the family she will one day raise." She could hardly have been clearer if she had said baldly, "I have Awakened." "I begin to wonder if Spock is the man I should marry if I am to have a family. He is a member of Starfleet, far from Vulcan. He is a legend, not a man."

"Why do you tell me this?" Stonn's voice was unsteady.

"You and I have known each other for many years. Our families are well acquainted. I know you to be a true Vulcan. Logically, you would make a better man to father my children." There it was out, and she had not even gagged on the untruth of it. Vulcans can lie if driven to it, she thought.

"I have a bond-mate," Stonn said, but from his eyes she knew he had taken her bait. He had wanted her ever since childhood, the Pre-Kahswan days when children were permitted to express desire.

"If you want me, it can be arranged," T'Pring said simply. "It must be now. I owe Spock the courtesy of informing him as quickly as possible that I wish to break the bond." Even as she spoke, T'Pring knew that could not be. Her awareness of Spock had been growing all day. The Enterprise was bringing him closer.

"As you say. T'Pring, come to my office again tomorrow and all the arrangements will be made." He ventured to take her hand. She returned the gesture but could not force herself to accept more. T'Pring rose quickly.

"Come, walk back to my home with me. It has been a long day, and I am tired." Surprisingly, she was tired, and her feet were unsteady. Without warning came a blast of emotion from Spock. He was shouting, angry at someone. T'Pring crumpled back to the seat.

"What is wrong?" Stonn did not hide his alarm.

"It is too late," T'Pring managed to say. "Spock is coming for me. I can feel him needing me."

"No! It shall not be."

"What can we do?" As if she did not know.

"You will challenge. I shall be your Champion."

"It is dangerous, Stonn. You might be hurt." This was best of all. He would think it all his own idea. Perhaps it was, in some degree. How did he know about her need for a Champion?

"Do not deny me the honor of fighting for you, T'Pring. It is something I have wished for years."

"I consent; but we must tell no one. It will be only a matter of days. Every minute he seems closer." The anger was gone now, and Spock seemed sad. He had not wanted this any more than she. "I must get home." It was awful, to be so close to his heart, to cry with him. Never, never did she want this again. She had to break it, any way she could. Soon it will be over, she promised herself.

Three days later she went to the Academy communications station to beam a message to Spock. The words of the Ritual had to be spoken before witnesses, to give the notice the marriage was due to take place. In the Time of the Beginning it had been done in the center of the village, and Champions had then come forth to fight for their women. It had been many years since the Challenge had been used, but the Ritual had not changed.

The words had been burnt on her memory. "Spock. Parted from me yet never parted; never and always touching and touched. I await thee at the appointed place." As he returned the words she looked curiously at him. He seemed alien on a starship, surrounded by out-worlders. Two or three of them seemed to regard him with more than curiosity about this ritual. Good, he did have friends who would come with him. It made the hidden part of her plan possible. Transmission ended, T'Pring hurried home to change her clothes. Stonn would be coming for her, and they would have to be at the appointed place soon.

Unexpectedly, her mother tried to talk her out of it. "T'Pring, you are following a dangerous course of action, one which will bring dishonor on this family. Your father and I worked very hard to gain you the advantage of being married to Spock. It is not logical, not rational to throw this away for Stonn."

"I have made up my mind, Mother. Do not ask me to change now."

"Then do not expect my blessing. If you go from this house to marry a man I deliberately did not choose for you, then do not expect to return."

T'Pring looked up slowly from fastening her dress. "You do not mean that."

"I do indeed. When you become his property, you will no longer be my daughter."

Shaken but determined, T'Pring said, "If that is how you wish it, then ;that is how it must be. I will not marry Spock."

"Divorce him afterwards. It is permitted." T'Cele was pleading.

"It is too difficult afterwards. You did not divorce my father even though you did not wish to be married to him." T'Pring had not wanted to bring this up, but she felt driven. Did no one understand what was in her mind?

"You are wrong, T'Pring. I had no wish to divorce Snurr. He was my chosen mate, and I had a duty towards him." T'Cele turned away from her daughter, and T'Pring could not read her eyes.

"A duty, yes, to go through Pon Farr with someone you did not choose. If I must go through this, then at least allow me some choice in the matter. I will not

be forced."

Very softly, T'Cele said, "I was not forced, T'Pring. Snurr was my choice. I accepted him freely every time it was necessary."

There seemed little point in continuing the conversation. T'Cele simply did not understand. T'Pring gathered up the last of her finery and turned to the door. "Goodbye, Mother," was all she said. Unhesitating she walked out to where Stonn and the others of the wedding party were waiting. Slowly they walked into the desert to "the appointed place."

Spock was waiting for her there as expected, beside him two of the men she had seen on the Enterprise. Covertly she studied them as Spock made the introductions and explanations to T'Pau. It did not take long to decide that the one he called Captain Kirk was the one to choose. Kirk was young, with a body that looked hard and capable of holding his own with Spock. If they killed each other fighting, so much the better. T'Pring waited as patiently as possible until the proper place, and she spoke the determining words.

"Kah-if-farr!"

Spock stared at her, amazement and question written on his face. The others gasped and looked to T'Pau.

T'Pau tried also to talk her out of it. "Are you prepared to become the property of the victor, not merely his wife but his chattel with no other rights or status?"

"I am prepared."

"Then choose."

"As it was in the dawn of our days, as it is today, as it will be through all our tomorrows, I make my choice. I choose this man." T'Pring pointed at Kirk.

Instant confusion. Spock tried to say no, he would not fight Kirk. Stonn protested the honor was his. In the end, it turned out exactly as T'Pring wished it. Spock and Kirk were handed the lirpa.

The fight seemed to last forever. Despite his condition, Spock was strong and familiar with his weapons. Kirk, not really understanding the situation, tried not to hurt Spock. T'Pring could see his bewilderment that his friend was actually trying to kill him. He was fighting not only Spock but gravity, atmosphere, and his conscience.

Before her eyes, Kirk turned from an out-worlder, an abstraction who would help her gain her own ends, into a person caught up in a situation he could not control. T'Pring was no longer even looking at Spock. Kirk was losing, as was inevitable for a human, and soon Spock would kill him. Her own motivation suddenly seemed unbelievably petty balanced against the life of this man. Beside her Stonn grabbed her arm roughly.

"Why?"

She looked at him, unable to answer.

Spock's other friend beside her cried out and rushed to Kirk's side. "Get your hands off him, Spock," he said in a voice rough with emotion. "It's finished. He's dead."

Numbly, Spock dropped the ahn woon and stumbled across the open space. Stricken, he came to her, asking explanations. At the look in his eyes she pulled herself up proudly and told him. Not the truth, but what she had told Stonn, and the reason she had chosen Kirk as her Champion as well. He was never going to learn anything else from her.

"Flawlessly logical," Spock said.

\* \* \* \* \*

.....Spock's eyes were no longer on her; and she realized he had taken his leave of T'Pau and, incredibly, given her to Stonn. Spock's need was gone, and T'Pring could only detect in him a deep grief at having killed his closest friend. Briefly, Spock glanced back at her with disgust in his eyes; then the transporter from the Enterprise took him away in a shimmer of sparkles.

It is over, T'Pring thought. I ought to be content. Why is it that instead I am sick of myself and what I have done? They will kill Spock for this, and he cares

only that Kirk is dead. These were his thoughts, not her own! Quickly she searched in her mind, only to find that she and Spock were still linked.

This is my punishment. I have thrown him away hoping to lose his touch, and I have lost only his regard and my honor. I am still as much a part of him as I was. Perhaps more; this event seems to have strengthened what it should have broken.

Stonn turned and walked towards the entrance. "Come, woman."

"I attend," she responded. What was it that Spock had said at the last to Stonn?

"You may find that having is not so satisfying a thing as wanting." He had not been speaking to her, but it was as true for her as it would be for Stonn. She now had what she had desired for many years, and it was turning to dust and ashes.

What will I do now? she wondered.

T'Pring followed her master out of the arena.



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To the student of Vulcan culture, one of the most obvious and interesting facets of Vulcan life must be the Pon Farr, the combination of biological and mysterious rituals that surround their unusual reproductive cycle. By now it is well-known in the Federation that Vulcan males (the data is unclear for females) generally do not engage in sexual activity except at stated intervals, the most common of which seems to be a period of seven standard years. In addition, there seems to be some evidence that this activity is a biological necessity, and that if for some reason the male is unable to find a sexual partner at this time he will die.

The intelligent observer is at first inclined to consider that this is a biological and instinctive act, similar to the Terran salmon or the giant eelbirds of Regulus V. A rut cycle of this type is a common enough method of reproduction among many other animal forms, both terrestrial and extra-terrestrial. However, there are certain complications involved. The Vulcans themselves, when questioned, call this "the price we pay for not having emotions the rest of the time." They are reluctant to discuss the topic further, particularly with non-Vulcans, and the observer must look to other sources to determine the truth.

The primary argument against a rut cycle of reproduction rests on the involved

family live and intelligence of the Vulcan people. All evidence we have at the moment shows that as intelligence increases in a species, the more important a stable family life becomes as a selective advantage. This is because the maturation level of the young becomes increasingly long to provide for the greater amount of information that must be learned instead of being instinctive. Vulcan is a particularly harsh planet for humanoid life (there is some evidence that intelligent life is not indigenous here), and individuals or mother/child dyads would not survive efficiently here. What we know of Vulcan indicates a long history of strong and involved family life that supports each individual within a clan framework.

There is some evidence that this family life is partially matriarchal in nature, and this is what one could expect if sexual activity is cyclic in the average Vulcan life. The mother of the family becomes all-important to the upbringing of the young, and the father is of negligible importance. (This is also seen in societies where the mechanics of reproduction are not understood.) However, we are aware that "the father figure has much meaning for Vulcans" and that fathers have a strong influence in Vulcan families. Women become the property of the males in the marriage ceremony and are restricted to their mates for sexual activity.

One can argue that this is a change which has occurred since the Reforms and is not evidence of a past history of strong family men. On the contrary, I believe that it has the exact opposite meaning: that the evidence of strong male dominance is the older pattern, and that the matriarchal system has developed since the Reforms to give females additional power in a society which traditionally gave them none. Additional evidence is that only after this are we aware of any females who are recognized as having a voice in Vulcan affairs. (Current example: T'Pau)

We are aware that the Reforms were made necessary by the excesses of violence and warfare of the males. If there had been an ancient pattern of matriarchal dominance, these brutal wars would most probably have eliminated such traces as we see now. This is a minor point, and susceptible to argument, but it is telling in the light of the other evidence.

Very few Vulcans have been studied extensively under scientific conditions so as to provide information about both their normal state and their sexual state. One example we do have easily available and well-documented is Commander Spock of the Starship Enterprise. He is only half Vulcan, but genetic scans have revealed that his physiology is dominantly Vulcan with human traits as recessive. Therefore I believe that it is possible to use him as a valid example for study, at least until we can regularly examine other Vulcans and provide a basis for comparison. (This is unlikely to happen in the near future. Vulcans are extremely secretive on this aspect of their lives.)

Vulcans do not secrete sexual hormones on a regular rate in a steady amount after puberty as do humans and other humanoids. Instead, this hormone is produced at an increasing rate as the result of physical activity, both sexual and hard work or exercise. (For specifics see tests run by Doctor Leonard McCoy, chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise.) In other words, the more activity a Vulcan engages in the more he is willing and interested in partaking of sex. The implications for pre-Reform Vulcans become obvious. The more they fought, the more they wanted to make love. The dominance of the males over the females meant that certain men were obviously without a sexual partner at certain times due to pregnancy or recent birth, menses, death, or the refusal of another man to allow access to the females under his control. Fighting for mates became a way of life. Fighting itself would produce a certain amount of sexual need due to the increased rate of hormone production. Unlike humans, Vulcans do not have the choice of "making love, not war", as the old saying goes. The two become inseparable. Only the most violent of acts, either love or aggression, are capable of reducing the level of hormone in the body. Accumulation begins again within a few short days. (See below)

The institution of Koon-Ut-Kalifee (Challenge/Marriage) was a positive selective force for those individuals with a high level of both sexual and aggressive appetite. At the same time, the harshness of the Vulcan climate was increasing, calling for increasing intelligence among the population in order to

adapt. Eventually Surak and the Reform Families realized that within a few generations this hormonal influence would have become so strong that the Vulcans would have wiped themselves entirely from the face of their planet.

There was a long struggle for peace, Surak realizing that only if the circle was once broken, Vulcans could stop killing each other and begin to expand and develop their society.

Basically, the results of the Reforms were as follows: a) Elimination of all aggression and other forms of physical labor. They had been nomadic hunters and warriors. They now settled and began a form of cultivation in order to live. b) Elimination of all emotion, and therefore sexual desire, as a desirable and in itself. Sex was considered necessary only for procreation. c) Increase in a state value for quiet, peaceful activities. The arts, which had largely been ignored, were developed. Music became a popular study. (Post Reform lytherette works with accompanying poems are some of Vulcan's most beautiful accomplishments.) Many Vulcans put their energy into scientific research. d) Life became, eventually, peaceful and predictable.

However, the Reforms had a side effect on Vulcan life which has now become known as the Pon Farr. Sexual activity had been reduced to a minimum and so had production of the sexual hormone. Sexual desire had not entirely ceased to exist, but the birth rate dropped alarmingly. Before the fact was noticed and a cultural solution developed, nature took a hand. Within a few years, Vulcan males were experiencing attacks of sexual need so severe that if they went unfulfilled at the time, the males often died from the increase in hormones of all types. (See McCoy, previously cited.) There is as yet no evidence of the effect on the families. Further study is indicated.

The problem for Vulcans is now this: the sex hormone has not been entirely eliminated, nor is it dissipated by any sexual activity. In fact, the hormones build up slowly if no sex is engaged in, and they continue to accumulate, at an increased rate even if a Vulcan engages in regular sex. (This was an obvious solution to the problem tried in early post-Reform days. It had no effect.) The same is true for hard physical labor. The evidence of this again lies with Commander Spock. Of necessity, this Vulcan leads a very active life on the Enterprise, alternating periods of quiet with meditation and with the hazards of shore duty. There is some evidence that Spock has been attracted on occasion to females he has met in the course of his duties (not Vulcan females), and that he may even have engaged in sex with one or more of them. (McCoy is not clear on this point.) However, he still experienced the Pon Farr, stardate 3372.7.

There is a suggestion that Spock may have experienced this event rather early in his life, although we are not sure what may have caused this. Some authorities consider this the effect of his human heritage. (See Lorrah, Vulcan Sexuality) It could also be the result of this increased level of activity over the usual Vulcan pattern: the hormone was being built to exceptionally high levels in his blood and returning him to a state not unlike that of pre-Reform Vulcans. It is interesting to note that this event did not culminate in sexual activity for Spock. The female chose the Challenge, and Spock fought, returning to duty at the end of the fight fully capable. Subsequent studies by Dr. McCoy indicated the hormone level was extremely low.

Vulcans are now faced with two undesirable alternatives. First, if they engage in regular sex and/or physical labor, they become so warlike and brutal that they could kill themselves off. Second, if they ignore sex on a daily basis, they either die out from lack of offspring or from the Pon Farr. The early records seem to indicate that the first men to go through the Pon Farr did not always die if unsatisfied sexually. However, the last 23 attempts to avoid the strength of this need have all resulted in death. Nature may no longer be giving Vulcans a choice. Even if they could now return to pre-Reform society, the Pon Farr is a fact of life.

Based on this information, here is a brief history of Vulcan to put the theory into proper perspective.

Vulcans are descended from an anthropoid ancestor (they are able to mate with

humans) which either had, or was in turn descended from another species which had, a rut cycle. By the time the present Vulcan race developed there was still enough influence from this cycle to provide for an irregular production of sex hormones.

The next step is basically the same whether or not Vulcans are native to the planet they now inhabit: as they adjusted to the planet and/or conditions on Vulcan continued to worsen, the harsh conditions favored the natural selection of increased intelligence in order to adapt, and a shift in the sexual cycle to provide for a great increase in reproduction. It is suggested that this took place over millions of years just as it did on Earth. (Query: are there other Vulcan species, animal or otherwise, which do not reproduce seasonally as is the norm on Earth and other similar planets. Why is man different? The inquiring student might find food for thought in this topic.)

Family structure developed. As intelligence increased and the young needed longer periods of maturation (see above), bands grew in size to tribes and clans. There is much documentation on this in ancient works, particularly in direct evidence embodied in religious and ritual practices. (Another point for the curious student) With the stability of secure family life, population was enabled to increase despite the high death rate caused by the hostile environment. This led to additional interaction of each Vulcan with a growing number of other Vulcans. Sources now become historical, and we have much information available from traditional records to indicate that aggression and sexual encounters grew in a geometric progression to the population increase.

However, this progression continued to the point that the increase in population no longer balanced the decrease due to death from battle, either with the climate or with other Vulcans. Extinction became an alarming and probable outcome.

Surak detailed the Reforms, and a lengthy period of fighting occurred before these were accepted by all Vulcans. This fighting tended to obscure the awareness by Vulcans of the effect of their hormonal secretion on their changing lifestyle.

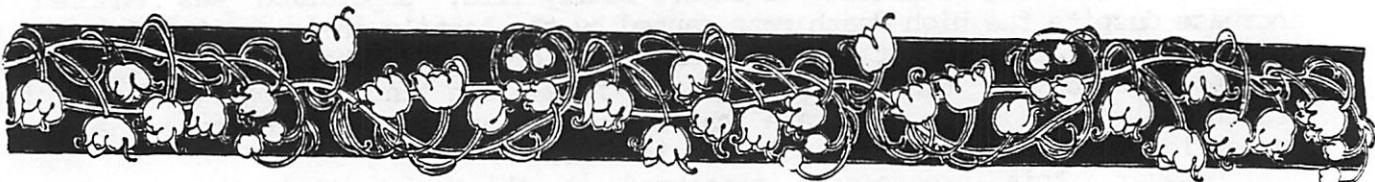
The past few thousand years under the Reforms have led to the situation at present on Vulcan. The Pon Farr has become a new fact of life that Vulcans are struggling to deal with. Aggression has become a thing of the past, and most Vulcans live a life of peace and contemplation. Reproduction remains a thing that is a necessity, despite the Vulcan's long life span nearly twice that of the average human, and a low birth rate has become one of Vulcan's greatest concerns.

There still remain many questions for the future that will determine how the Vulcans will eventually adapt to their harsh planet and their biological problems. One current solution of a cultural nature is the Kahswan Ordeal for children at the age of seven standard years. This rite of passage is designed to insure that Vulcans stay physically strong despite the lack of emphasis in their culture on physical prowess. From the human standpoint the number of deaths that occur each year are doubly regrettable since the children are so young, though the Ordeal accomplishes its purpose in keeping the race strong and healthy. However, evidence exists that by favoring one type of individual before puberty, there has been no change in the pattern of hormonal accumulation that results in the Pon Farr.

It also appears, although records on this have only been kept a short time, that Vulcan children are increasingly capable at a younger age. Schooling currently begins at age four, and children work immediately with advanced computers of a type human children do not encounter until the age of twelve or thirteen. Vulcan psychologists theorize that as the intelligence level of the general population increases beyond a certain point, all young are born with increasingly high intelligence. Vulcan children appear to have an almost instantaneous learning ability, being born with a high level of awareness for the world around them. This appears to be necessary since their brains control their bodies to a larger extent than do other humanoid types, again a fairly new adaptation. (See Spock's Brain, Blish et al.) The implication of this seems to be that eventually Vulcans will be able to control their hormonal secretions, including the sexual, to the ability that they can control their breathing, healing rate, heart beat, and so forth, at the present time. More study into exactly how they do this and on how early they are

presently able to attempt it is necessary. At present, however, it appears to be the best possibility for a solution that will be natural and long lasting, although some studies with repressant drugs are being done with the chronically ill in hopes of preventing their deaths from the strong forces of the Pon Farr. (Lorrah, previously cited.)

I am indebted to Poul Anderson for the suggestion I derived from his basic research into the history of the Diomedians ("The Man Who Counts"). The situation is analogous, not identical, but it led to the development of the theory as outlined above. I am also indebted to the records of the Enterprise, in particular the medical reports of Leonard McCoy concerning Commander Spock. It is hoped that an understanding of the information above will lead to greater awareness of the similarities and differences of Vulcans and humans eventually leading to greater galactic peace in the future.



## Logic & the Vulcan Myths

- ^^ This report contains CLASSIFIED material,  
Prepared by Dr. M'Benga, specialist in Vulcan medicine, Starfleet Surgeon General's Office
- ^^ This report has been prepared for those members of Starfleet who are required by their duties to work in direct contact with Vulcans. Careful perusal will give one a greater familiarity with the psychology of Vulcan thought and enable one to understand more readily what Vulcans mean when they say they follow a system of logic.

Human intelligence has been measured in arbitrary terms based on scientific examinations with the mean given at 100 points. All Humans can be placed for convenience on this scale. The distribution follows a standard bell curve with the vast majority of humans falling somewhere between 80 and 120 points. While it is always misleading to compare too closely between species, it is apparent that the mean of Vulcan intelligence is placed much higher on the same scale, at approximately 130 points. When the two distributions are compared, we see that all Vulcans measure higher than the average for Humans and can go a great deal higher than is considered possible for Humans.

This fact is not of much value in considering Starfleet personnel. Personnel are selected on the basis of standard tests and are required to fall within a certain range. Therefore, any Vulcans met in the course of Starfleet duties will be of comparable intelligence levels to any Humans in similar positions, and the Human should not feel any lack of ability in comparison.

There is, however, a related difficulty to be encountered. At this point, the

Human unfamiliar with highly intelligent, or "gifted" Humans, should acquaint himself/herself with the literature. For those so acquainted, a brief summary will suffice. Very intelligent Humans, particularly those in the upper two percent of intelligence levels, tend to look at the world a little differently than the rest of Humanity. They, on the whole, tend to behave as if the world can be controlled rationally and to be frustrated when it is impossible to do so. A supreme example of this is the inability of the lower grade student who is poor in basic arithmetic, cannot spell, and has an atrocious handwriting. These are basic learning tools, which are impossible to reason oneself into acquiring, but must be learned by rote and practice, two techniques the gifted tend to avoid actively.

Vulcans, for the purposes of this report, can be considered a race of the highly gifted. Two brief examples capable of verification from Starship records, concern Spock, First Officer of the Enterprise, and his father Sarek, the Ambassador from Vulcan. On a recent Babel mission Sarek apparently tried to reason himself out of a serious heart condition. His poor health should logically have prevented his participation in such a strenuous activity. Similarly, Spock has often tried to reason himself into controlling events that cannot be so manipulated. An example of this is the disastrous results of his command of the Galileo shuttlecraft in the Murasaki phenomenon. Despite much evidence to the contrary, he made no effort to consider the emotional responses of the natives and continued to behave as if they could be considered rationally motivated.

At this point it may be well to remember that the Vulcan system of logic has never been adequately studied by Human observers. They may have a somewhat different interpretation of the word "logic" than is possible for Humans to understand. Perhaps even a different word should have been used by the original translators of Vulcan thought.

For example, Vulcans believe in the IDIC concept — infinite diversity in infinite combinations. To Humans this logically implies acceptance of the differences among all peoples. Yet, Vulcan children are permitted, unpunished, to call Spock an "Earther," a term with definite pejorative connotations. T'Pau asks Spock, "Art thee Human or art thee Vulcan?" again, with the connotation that Vulcan is Better. Spock chooses to "exorcise" (his word) his Human half, as it makes him less Vulcan. Sarek apparently suppresses his curly hair.

Also, Vulcans believe in non-violence. Yet they are capable of the execution technique of Tal-shaya; they are expert with the lirpa and ahn woon, personal combat weapons; and an execution figure with axe attends Vulcan weddings — just in case there is a challenge and "cowardice is shown."

Vulcans often declare that they believe in reason over emotion, and it is apparent that their culture has been designed to encourage such attitudes among all members. Yet, the greatest Vulcan of them all, Surak, shows us an emotional commitment to non-violence. His reason should show him on Excalbla, as it does us, that there are other non-violent ways to stop a war than going uninformed into an enemy camp. Sarek, the cool and dispassionate ambassador, blames his son for his human characteristics and picks fights with a) that same son, b) his human wife, and c) the Tellarite ambassador. Even T'Pring, Spock's intended bride, prefers another to Spock. Her totally inadequate explanation, which Spock calls "flawlessly logical" is that she prefers not to be the consort of a legend. No comment is necessary.

With the above details in mind, the following items are presented as study and discussion questions. There are no known "right" answers, as Vulcans do not permit independent observers on Vulcan, and records do not show enough information on these points to be conclusive.

1. Vulcan is a planet of the star 40 eridani, a red sun. The planet is close to the sun, with a nearly circular orbit that prevents wide seasonal variations. It does not have a moon, but there are other planets in close orbit, one of which is a gas giant, which apparently affects the planet in some fashion. The period of rotation and the annual orbit do not fit into a regular and arbitrary time system.

The calendar follows a rough three season division, and a unit similar to a month exists. (One known as Tasmeen is mentioned in Starfleet records.) How do Vulcans deal with the inaccuracies and irregularities of such an arrangement? Consider: even Humans are disturbed by the standard day/month/year system of Earth and the extra day necessary every four years to adjust to reality.

2. Weather has long been one of the greatest inconveniences of planetary life. What do Vulcans do? We know their planet is harsh and the weather violent. In addition, they have volcanoes, sandstorms, and blistering heat on a scale unknown here. Do they accept it, ignore it, or circumvent it logically? How do you circumvent weather logically?

3. To the average Human, dust is a personal imposition. You clean the house on one day, and all that work should be rewarded by remaining cleaned. Dust should not settle on the top of the refrigerator unless wanted. It is repetitive and time-wasting to be dusting daily. On Vulcan dust is infinitely more prevalent than on most of Earth. Not only that, but Vulcans are what we might call "low tech." They do not have the vast power systems and elaborate labor saving devices common to more Human planets, so that housecleaning robots and continuous clean are not available. Again, do they ignore dust, accept it, or have a logical solution.

4. Babies are the acid test of any Human's rationality. A new human infant has to be the most emotional, least logical entity in the universe. It is self-centered, and for a certain period of time, totally impossible to deal with logically. Any Human who attempts to deal with them so usually ends up in a state any decent jello would envy. There is no evidence that Vulcan babies are any different. In fact, since Vulcans and Humans can interbreed, they are genetically compatible; and therefore Vulcans are unlikely to have a genetic predisposition towards early rationality. Even assuming Vulcan children are socialized faster than Human ones, there still has to be some period of adjustment and pure infant behavior. Do Vulcan parents accept this with understanding and patience, knowing that the child will soon grow up? Or do they — once in a while — get just a little upset when their plans are disrupted once again, perhaps say something like "feldercarb," or even lose their belief in non-violence and smack the damn kid?

From the above discussion and facts, it should be obvious that there are vast discrepancies between the desired behavior on Vulcan, the mindset of Vulcans, and the realities of dealing with situations that cannot be controlled logically. Vulcans desire logic and reason above all things, and their high intelligence predisposes them to this type of thought. In addition, their culture has been structured in such a way as to, in most instances, make rational activity acceptable and obvious. They have, however, by design or accident, neglected to take into account many things which are not and never can be logical on an absolute basis. Yet their cultural patterns are such that it is difficult for them to deal with such discrepancies, and they tend to behave as though these do not exist.

It is this point that the Human must keep in mind firmly when dealing with Vulcans. It becomes too easy to take them at their own evaluation as rational and logical, and to blame oneself for any errors made in working together. Certainly, Humans are emotional creatures and often tend to select emotional responses when rational ones are more appropriate to the situation. Yet Vulcans tend to select rational answers when emotional ones are necessary. It is for this reason that Human/Vulcan teams have proven very successful in Starship exploration. Always remember that the most successful mission of a Starship yet known was under the direction of a Human captain, James T. Kirk, and a Vulcan first officer, Mr. Spock. It is an unbeatable combination.





With a sigh, Dr. Leonard McCoy ushered the last of the Enterprise crew on sick call out of his office and sank with relief into his desk chair. Seems as if we're having more than the usual number of minor accidents lately, he thought. It must be this new sector of space we're in. He pushed aside the clutter of unfinished papers on his desk and found the form for the report to the officer of the day. Jim'll want to know all about this, his thoughts ran on. He's not content just to be the captain; he's got to live all our lives for us, too. Wish he'd manage to get us out of all these dad-blamed cosmic storms. We're all so nervous we're ready to jump out of our skins.

McCoy grinned suddenly at a vision of the senior officers working on the bridge, skin deposited in characteristic fashion at their stations. Spock's, of course, would be neatly folded on his chair. Jim would drop his wherever it was convenient. And Uhura.... McCoy speculated for a moment on that particular officer doing a strip with her lovely, brown epidermis. Wonder what I'd do with mine, if it comes to that, he thought. Probably never get a chance to take it off. Something'd come up, and there I'd be: running after Jim and Spock, trying to keep things from getting worse and pulling their fat out of the fire as usual.

The persistent alarm of the yellow alert interrupted his thoughts, a harsh, blaring sound he had heard too many times over the last couple of weeks. At first McCoy didn't pay much attention, but as he worked, he became aware of an unfamiliar commotion in the corridors. He leaned over to his desk communicator and signaled the bridge.

"Uhura, what the devil is going on around here."

"Damage to the starboard nacelle, Dr. McCoy," Uhura said in a hurried voice. "We're about to go on evacuation standby. Excuse me, but will you clear the channel?"

McCoy released the switch as though struck. "Evacuation!" he exclaimed softly. "That isn't possible. Jim would never evacuate the Enterprise." McCoy suddenly knew his place was on the bridge and signaled the duty nurse's office. "Chapel? You're in charge here. I'll be on the bridge." He ran for the turbolift.

McCoy arrived to find the entire bridge complement clustered around the engineering board. Spock was seated at the chief engineer's place, talking to Scott below decks.

"This is it, Captain," he heard Scott's disembodied voice on the bridge. "The matter/antimatter units have gone into the red zone proximity, and there is no longer any hope of avoiding a chain reaction. We've got to jettison the nacelles and move out in under forty-five minutes."

There was an outburst of excited comment and whispering from the officers standing listening. Jim Kirk's voice cut through it with a single word. "Spock?"

The Vulcan first officer looked up to meet Kirk's eyes, and McCoy could not remember seeing him look so emotionless - so alien - ever before. "Engineer Scott is entirely accurate," he said in a flat voice. "A chain reaction of this type is inevitable and irreversible."

There was absolute silence on the bridge for a moment as everyone considered that, and McCoy saw Kirk's face harden as the realization sank in. The captain drew back his shoulders. In a voice uncharacteristically sharp, Kirk said, "All right, Spock, get down there and give Mr. Scott a hand. It will take all three of us to activate the jettison mechanism, but you can get it on standby. I'll join you as soon as I can."

The others scattered back to their stations as Spock stood up and paused a moment before his captain. "There is nothing that can be done," he repeated.

"Are you sure of that?" McCoy demanded quickly. "You've managed to pull us out of a lot of situations where you had simply to invent something to do."

"In no case, Doctor, did it mean having to defy the laws of physics. The shielding on the nacelles is deteriorating and...."

"That's enough," Kirk interrupted. "Spock, get going." He turned, speaking to each of his officers in turn. "Uhura, evacuation alarm. Sulu, main impulse engines on standby. Chekov, begin a countdown at minus ten minutes. Mark and move, everyone. I'll be in engineering."

Kirk started for the turbolift, but McCoy stopped him. "Jim, can I do anything?"

The captain stared at him as though he hadn't remembered McCoy was on the bridge. He shook his head. "Thanks, Bones, but unless you can defy the laws of physics, I think we're stuck. It isn't as though the Enterprise will be destroyed," he went on as if trying to convince himself. "She's been constructed with this kind of an emergency in mind. The main hull will shear off from the nacelles and engineering decks and can get clear on impulse power. We'll make it."

"That doesn't make it easy, though, does it?" McCoy asked gently.

"It'll be like losing a part of myself." White-lipped, Kirk turned to the turbolift as the doors opened. "See you later, Bones."

The doors shut before McCoy thought to get in with Kirk and go down to his own station. Then he heard Sulu say, "Warp drive's gone," and felt his stomach drop as the ship went instantly from warp speed to impulse power without the usual smooth transition.

The doors of the turbolift opened and a group of technicians and relief personnel arrived to take up emergency stations on the bridge. Around them all came the crackle of voices on the intercom as departments cleared with their senior officers.

Professionally intrigued, McCoy let the turbolift leave again without him and made a brief survey of the crew on duty. Jim would be proud of them were he watching. No hysterics; no panic; just a lot of efficiency and work. The lifts were operating to capacity and it was several minutes before he heard one return. McCoy headed across the deck to make sure he caught it this time.

He was met by the rigid figure of the chief engineer who stalked past him straight to the engineering console. Scott began to flip switches, shutting down connections. "Where're Jim and Spock?" McCoy demanded.

"Still down there, alone," Scott answered. "It's my job. I should have been allowed to stay there until it was complete." His voice was bitter.

"It's Jim's ship."

"Aye, but it'll hurt each of us just the same."

"T minus ten and counting," Chekov began, and heads went up all over the bridge. Below decks came the faint sounds of beginning separation. The usually quiet ship groaned as bulkheads closed to the accompaniment of emergency alarms. Tiny explosions popped, breaking the major connections between the two hulls. McCoy saw mirrored on every face the same disbelief and horror he felt as they watched the main view screen. The nacelles and engineering decks were sliding away from them,

slowing growing smaller in the blackness beyond. It seemed to take forever to pull away from them on impulse power alone, and they seemed impossibly fragile and awkward without the heavy, saucer-shaped main hull to balance them.

"Now!" came Ensign Chekov's voice into the stillness of the bridge. There was a blaze of light, followed immediately by a second, leaving nothing on the screen.

There were stifled outcries all around, and Yeoman Jones put her head down on the railing and sobbed. Relief and regret - a little of both, McCoy decided. Very healthy.

Uhura was the first to recover. She turned in her chair away from the screen and hit the button on the captain's bosun's signal. "Captain Kirk, come in please." There was no answer.

McCoy leaped for the communications board with large steps and shouldered her aside. Pressing the button himself, he called, "Jim, can you hear me? Spock, can you answer?" His eyes met Uhura's and saw his same fear reflected. Uhura reached to call security to initiate a standard search for the two officers.

They all jumped as a call came through the board. "Dr. McCoy to Sickbay. Dr. McCoy needed in Sickbay."

Slowly McCoy walked toward the turbolift. Then he turned back to Uhura. "You'll call me?" She nodded, unable to speak. Fear clutching at his stomach, McCoy disappeared into the lift. He left behind a silent bridge of crew and officers waiting for the search report that wasn't going to come. The captain and first officer were not on board; they all knew it.

Jim Kirk forced himself back to awareness and looked dazedly around the engineering room. Spock still lay unconscious beside him, live wires spitting from the board he had been working on. It was stupid to do that, Kirk thought as he struggled to his feet. It seemed to have worked, however. The jettison had begun. From the speaker he could hear the voice of Ensign Chekov counting down the minutes...no, seconds! he realized with alarm. We've got to get out of here! "Spock, we've got to move!" he shouted at his first officer as he tried to drag him to his feet. Slowly, perhaps by force of habit and training, Spock responded; but Kirk was sure he was only semi-conscious. The captain looked around in despair. Maybe we can make it across the hall. It's no good trying for the main hull. They'll have the screens up, and they're moving. Perhaps we can get to the planet below...before this hull goes.

Supporting the Vulcan, Kirk pushed the uncooperative Spock before him and onto the cargo transporter. Spock dropped with a thud as Kirk ran for the controls.

"Forty-five...forty...." came Chekov's voice in the corridor.

No time to second guess. Kirk ran for the equipment locker, only to find the survival packs opened, their contents strewn across the bottom of the locker. With a curse he grabbed the two nearest, stuffing stray equipment in haphazardly as he headed back toward the console. Pushing the time-delay control for the transporter, he rejoined Spock on the platform, dropping the packs on other transporter disks. Kirk knelt by Spock, one hand on the Vulcan's shoulder. There was a very good chance they weren't going to make it this time.

Then he knew it was all right. They materialized in a large clearing, in an area surrounded by hardwood forest. Tall trees rose around them, and Spock lay on purple meadow grass dotted with small orange and green flowers. Kirk turned quickly to the packs and pulled open the first one. On top was a small medkit. He pulled out the scanner, set it for Vulcanoids, and ran it quickly over Spock. To his relief the vital signs were all there, although weak; Kirk didn't have the faintest idea of what to do. There was a small hypospray with Masiform-D, so Kirk tried a small dose of the stimulant, wishing fervently for McCoy. Nothing happened, and he didn't dare try another. Spock was going to have to come out of this on his own.

Jim Kirk stood and looked up into the pale orange sky. Somewhere up there was what remained of the Enterprise. He had to get back there if he could. The opened pack lay close by his feet. Kirk dumped it out onto the ground, rummaging through the contents to find a communicator. Ropes, phasers, protective clothing, supplies,

other necessities fell around his feet. He saw no communicator. With a snarl of rage, Kirk emptied the second pack next to the first. A different array of objects fell out, but still no communicator.

It had been a long time since Kirk had felt so helpless and frustrated. Somewhere above him, not too far away as he had known distance, the Enterprise needed him. They had no way of knowing where he had gone, and he had no way of telling them. He didn't even know if they were safe.

"Damn it, Spock, wake up. I need you." As concerned for his friend as for the ship, Kirk began to make a mental inventory of the contents. It was beginning to look as though he might actually have to depend on those things, and Kirk hoped there wasn't anything else missing.

Spock came to consciousness slowly, aware for a while only of the pain in his left arm which seemed to extend along every nerve, spreading into his body before slowly diffusing itself. As he became more internally awake, he realized something should be bothering him. Forcing himself to search back to his last conscious thought, Spock remembered the Enterprise. In alarm, he made the final effort to regain his senses.

His eyes opened on what to him was an improbable scene. He was lying on a sleeping bag close to a well built fire, his left arm held snugly in place with a neatly wrapped bandage. The sky was dim above him, a few stars glowing through the branches of tall trees around a clearing. Spock sat up in a hurry. Two survival packs lay outside a cleared fire area, their contents carefully laid out and stacked. There was no one in sight.

"Captain!" Spock said loudly. "Are you there?" The last thing he could remember was being with Kirk in engineering, doing something to a control panel that had refused his emergency override. "Captain!" he called again, and he struggled to regain his feet.

Jim Kirk burst out of the woods to his left. "Spock, are you all right?" The relief on his face was obvious. "I was beginning to think you'd never wake up."

"I am in fair condition, Captain," Spock answered with relative control. "Where are we? What has happened?"

"First, here's some water," Kirk held out the canteen to Spock, "and the emergency medkit. You'll have to decide what you need. One of those damned live electric things you were short-circuiting hit back and knocked us both flat."

Spock took the canteen but did not drink. "Did the override work?"

"I think so. Separation was beginning when I got us out, and I could hear Chekov still counting down."

Taking a deep breath, Spock said patiently, "Captain, where are we and why are we here?"

"On the planet we were surveying...."

"Planet LS422-1," Spock put in automatically.

"...all the turbolifts were out, everyone was gone but you and me, and you certainly couldn't climb the gangways semi-conscious as you were. So I beamed us down on the cargo transporter."

"And the Enterprise? Spock asked.

"How the hell should I know? Those survival packs were strewn all over the locker, and I managed to get off the ship without a communicator. I have no idea where the ship is, and no one there has any idea where we are. When we get back, I'll roast whoever left those packs in such a mess."

"It seems unlikely, in that case, that the Enterprise will be able to locate us or assist us in any way," Spock said thoughtfully. He sat down on his sleeping bag and began to open the canteen one-handed.

"Here, let me." Kirk dropped down beside his friend. "I couldn't take the time to call them. Chekov had reached t minus forty seconds when I hit the transporter button. We had to leave while power held." The cap on the canteen refused to give and Kirk twisted it angrily, abruptly spilling water all over Spock. "I did the only thing I could, for all the good it's done us. We're here and

they're...God knows where." He stood up without looking at Spock. "I'll get you something to wipe that off," he said as he stalked across to the packs.

Spock sat unmoving, knowing he could say nothing yet to relieve the anger and frustration Kirk felt at being away from where he was needed. Oddly, the Enterprise was not what concerned Spock most at the moment, only Kirk. "What do you plan to do next," he asked when Kirk came back with a small towel.

"That depends on you. Is your arm only burned, or is there more? Can you heal it?"

"There is some neural damage as well," Spock admitted. "I do not know yet what to expect." Then more softly. "It is quite painful." Like fire, he thought. "I should be able to control that and manage adequately if I do not strain it. That is all I can tell you at present."

It had grown very dark as they were talking and Kirk looked around now as thought only just realizing it. There was no moon. Beneath the heavy trees, the only light was from their campfire. It seemed dark and forbidding even to Spock who was accustomed to nights with no moon. The desert on Vulcan was flat and clear, where his night vision enabled him to see for miles.

"I'll get a light," Kirk said, rising. "Then we have a lot of planning to do. I wish we'd been able to complete the survey, or that we had a tricorder.

"Without a tricorder, things will be much more difficult, Captain. It seems we must review evacuation procedures when we return." Spock's orderly soul was distressed by the disorganization displayed by such carelessness.

"If we do get back again, ever." Kirk stopped and looked up, still vainly searching for a speck of light to call home. "Where are they, Spock? Is my ship safe?"

"I regret I have no way of knowing, Captain," Spock said formally. He searched for something positive to say. "However, from what you told me, it is highly probable the main hull was able to separate safely."

"Do you suppose she'll land here?" Kirk's eyes were still on the sky.

"Negative. We did manage to dispatch distress calls to Starbase Fifteen. In such a case, it would be standard procedure to head in that direction on impulse power until rescue tugs could come to tow them in." Spock resolutely ignored the mounting pain in his arm and stood. "May I suggest we eat something and settle down for the night? There is much to be done and we can accomplish little at the moment."

"You go ahead. I'm not hungry." Kirk proceeded to set up a light. Then he dropped down on the other sleeping bag and lay back, eyes staring up again through the trees.

Spock went over to where Kirk had cached the rations and selected something called "insta-heat vege-pro." Perhaps a little subterfuge was in order to get Kirk moving and eating. "Captain, would you mind opening this for me?" Kirk looked at him in surprise. "It takes two hands," Spock explained as he handed the container to Kirk.

With a shrug, Kirk broke the heat seal and pulled the tab. Before he could hand it back, a tantalizing odor rose from the open top. He held onto it thoughtfully. "Are there two of these, Spock? I think I could eat something after all." Silently, Spock handed him another container and took back the first to hold gingerly with his burned fingers.

After a moment of silent eating, Kirk looked up to see Spock maneuvering quite well with both hands. He laughed, and his face lit up. "All right, my fine Vulcan friend; I can tell when I am being manipulated. It goes down well, though. You're probably right to get me to eat."

"It is not wise to let one's strength give out in a survival situation," Spock lectured between bites. "We must use our resources wisely and plan to find alternative food sources until the Enterprise returns for us."

"Will she return?"

"Highly probable," Spock answered. "When they reach the base and begin the briefings on the accident, the log will certainly be reviewed most thoroughly."

Kirk sat up eagerly. "And they'll find the transporter activity in engineering just before the final separation."

Spock nodded and continued. "Dr. McCoy is certain to consider that sufficient evidence that we transported safely off the ship. He may have to argue with his superiors, but it is very difficult to ignore Dr. McCoy when he is determined."

That drew another laugh from Kirk. "Very difficult," he agreed as he finished the last of the vege-pro. "Now, let's get some planning done and put a few thousand credits of survival training to good use. Tell me everything you can remember from the survey reports, and we'll see what we have to go on with." Spock bowed to the inevitable and began to recite from the reports.

It was many hours into the night before they finally settled down to sleep, having made tentative plans to cover the next few days. Spock had decided from the stars that they were in the southern hemisphere, which meant it was early autumn. That meant there would be abundant food, particularly late fruits and nuts, and summer fattened animals and birds for Kirk to hunt. On the other hand, the weather could become increasingly cold and stormy, making shelter and food preservation vital necessities.

I should not have been so positive, Spock told himself severely as he composed himself for sleep. It is going to be more difficult the longer we are here. We have to do more than survive; we may have to live here. Without a communicator.... Spock settled himself into the sleeping bag, aware once again of the fire in his arm. On the other side of the campfire, he could see Kirk's profile shadowed by the firelight, and that was his answer. Kirk needed hope now and being positive would give it to him. Ridiculously emotional, his Vulcan conscience probed him. The captain does not need to be coddled. He needs precise and accurate information from his science officer. There did not seem to be any way to resolve this conflict. Spock gave his head a brief shake to clear his thoughts and went to sleep.

Kirk and Spock had planned to spend the next few days in the same clearing where they had beamed down, exploring their situation. It seemed wise to stay in the general area in case anyone came looking for them, but they had to make sure this was practical. Spock went out scouting as soon as he awoke and had gone barely a hundred meters when he called out. "Captain, there is something here you ought to see."

Jim Kirk came running in the direction of Spock's voice, breaking his way through the tangle of wild shrubbery. Spock was standing in a clear space five or six meters wide and extending out of sight in both directions to the side. "A road?" Kirk asked.

"It would seem so, Captain." Spock knelt and took up a handful of something to show Kirk. "The forest here has obviously been cleared in a regular fashion and this seems to be a sort of gravel. You can see wheel ruts, although they are overgrown.

"The ruts run directly down the center of the cleared area. I would suggest a private road, leading in and out of a specific spot. For what purpose, I have no idea; the natives are of a low level of civilization. We can certainly expect inhabitants coming through here at irregular intervals."

"Too busy for us to set up housekeeping next to," Kirk grinned. He dropped the gravel. "We'd better take a few days scouting in the opposite direction and find us a new camping spot."

"Captain, we may have to contact the inhabitants in the future." Spock had promised himself to be less encouraging in the morning light.

Kirk turned and started back towards camp. "We'll worry about that later if we have to. For now, we keep out of sight and obey the Prime Directive. And if we move in with the locals, no one will ever find us. Hell, they'll never even know we've been here."

"Logical, Captain," Spock said as he followed. Why, he wondered, did Humans find it necessary to use expletives when they were emotionally distraught?

Back in camp they settled down to a meager breakfast, by Kirk's standards at any rate, and discussed the day ahead. "How's your arm feeling this morning?" Kirk

asked suddenly as he realized that Spock was still favoring it.

"The burns are nearly healed." He held out the hand to show only a slight puckered area of new skin. "The neural damage is unchanged."

"It isn't going to improve by itself, is it? Well, we'll get settled as soon as we can and give you a chance to try out one of those Vulcan healing trances."

"I shall not be able to repair the damage by that means, Captain. It has gone beyond simple tissue repair. If there were a qualified Vulcan healer here, perhaps it could be managed. Alone, it will be impossible." Spock did not meet Kirk's eyes. "It is something I shall have to learn to adjust to."

"Will it get worse?" Kirk demanded.

"I do not know."

"What do you think?"

Spock looked straight ahead and considered. It went against his nature to speculate without data, and he logically resented Kirk for forcing it. For the first time in his life, he was beginning to be aware of what it meant to be physically disadvantaged. He had never before been weaker than a Human and comparatively helpless by his own standards. It was oddly very difficult to be logical about a physical weakness when one happened to be the weaker party. Much of Kirk's resentful denial of their differences began to make sense to him.

"Spock, did you hear me?"

"Excuse me, Captain. I was considering. I think that my condition should remain stable if I do not overexert myself. If the situation should require otherwise before I can receive medical help, there is a 93 percent probability that I could lose use of the arm permanently."

Kirk rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I guess it's best, then, if we find a place to make camp today, we can change it later if we have to. Can you travel?"

"I shall do whatever is necessary."

"No, that's not good enough. I am not going to risk it, even if you are willing to ignore pain until you fall apart." At Spock's suddenly set expression, he added, "That's an order, mister."

Spock glared at him. "I shall be able to manage my own pack and anything else that does not require strength in both arms. If I feel any limitation, I shall inform you." He rose and began to replace a few remaining items in his pack.

"Stiff-necked as ever, aren't you?" Jim grinned. "But I'm still going to be keeping an eye on you. You're just going to have to put up with my lead, even if you are the survival expert." He lifted Spock's heavy pack and held it for him to put on.

"I fail to see what you find so amusing."

"Call it a learning experience, a lesson in humility. It's supposed to be good for the soul."

"Indeed." With his free hand, Spock assisted Kirk with his somewhat lighter pack.

"We've lived through a lot worse together, Spock. No reason we can't make it until the Enterprise gets here. You know what's bothering me most right now?" Kirk was obviously beginning to get over his depression, and it amused Spock to see his captain trying to encourage him now.

"I cannot imagine."

"Wondering what's going to keep you from dying of boredom if we get snowbound this winter." Kirk was grinning like an idiot. Spock decided the captain needed a taste of his own medicine.

"That had not occurred to me. It is indeed something to consider. Have you ever seen an insane Vulcan?" Spock glanced sideways at Kirk. "We shall hope that I find much to occupy my mind. Now, let us be on our way." He started off, followed by a pensive Jim Kirk.

For some reason, Spock was feeling much better. Perhaps the captain had encouraged him after all. That thought was something to think about, for a while.

The Enterprise and crew were brought safely to Starbase 15 within six weeks of

the jettison. To his surprise, Dr. McCoy found himself immediately saddled with the reams of paperwork and official briefings concerning the accident which were required to set the record straight for Starfleet officials. Resentful at first that Scotty was spending most of his time with the damaged ship, McCoy was soon glad that all this work had fallen to him. It gave him something to do besides sit and think about the fate of his lost friends.

McCoy was hard at work in the small office assigned to him when Scotty appeared late one afternoon. The Scotsman's face was one huge smile. "We've just got word that we can take the Enterprise back to Earth for repairs. The navy yards have an engineering hull and nacelles of our class in progress, and we can requisition them." McCoy knew Scotty had feared they would scrap what was left of his beloved ship. His regained enthusiasm was refreshing. "We can leave right now to take her back for hook-up."

"So soon, Scotty?" McCoy was startled. "I wanted your support for a rescue mission."

"Aye, I'd have liked to be in on that, but the captain will need a ship to come back to. I'd best make sure he has one." He paused before forging on. "Will there be a rescue mission, Doctor? Do you have even a wee clue that they could have survived?"

McCoy shook his head. "Nothing beyond an absolute refusal to believe that they could have gotten caught in that explosion. I'm counting on the hangar deck being in that section of the hull. Maybe a shuttle craft...."

"It was not the shuttle craft, Doctor, it was the transporter." The voice from the doorway was so like Spock's in manner of speaking that both men turned with expectant faces. Before them stood a tall Vulcan woman, dressed in engineering red, her long black hair braided in loops that hung down her back.

"Who are you?" McCoy demanded.

"My name is T'Siri. I am a communications officer at Vulcan Starbase 3. I have been reading over the reports of your accident." Almost impatiently she strode into the room, long legs carrying her purposefully to the desk where McCoy had been working. "Where is your copy?" she demanded.

Are Vulcans really all that alike? McCoy wondered as he searched out his accident report cassette from the disordered pile on the desk.

The ensign took it from him and inserted it in the desk viewer, leaning over just as Spock had done so often: straight-backed with feet precisely planted. McCoy swallowed the lump the gesture and his comparison brought to his throat.

"Did you not understand the impact of the last log entry?" T'Siri asked. Her long, thin fingers worked the controls of the viewer, finding a specific place in the report. The log appeared on the screen, running swiftly by until she froze the tiny image. "Here we have a starship in a total emergency situation. The ship is in desperate need of all available energy; everyone has significant duties to perform, yet the cargo transporter is in use." She straightened and faced the two men. "Your Captain and Commander Spock are on LS422-1. The coordinates are listed."

Scott was staring at the line indicated, his face slowly lighting up. "She's right, Doctor. That's your evidence."

McCoy was at the tele-com on his desk, already calling the Enterprise officers remaining on the base. This news was too good to wait, the first really hopeful thing he'd heard since the fateful day. He wanted them all to hear it from T'Siri. It was some minutes before McCoy looked back to T'Siri, who stood patiently waiting by the desk. Her arms were crossed, her face unreadable. "Do you mind waiting to report that to the rest of the Enterprise officers?"

"Not at all, Doctor. I have been assigned to the rescue mission."

"Is that how you know who I am?" McCoy was beginning to feel full of unanswered questions about this woman. Was it just because she was Vulcan that she reminded him so forcefully of Spock?

"I have read the reports. Your identity was a logical deduction."

Just then Chekov burst into the room, panting. "What is it, Doc?" he asked.

"What's the 'good news'?"

Sulu was right behind him. "Yeah, Doc, what's going on?"

"Meet Ensign T'Siri of Vulcan Base 3. She was reading over our reports and found something we'd missed in the log. I think there's a pretty good chance we'll be leaving on a rescue mission after all." McCoy couldn't keep back a smile.

"The log? What did we miss?" Uhura came in with Christine Chapel. Right behind them were several others. The small office was about as full as it could manage.

"Go ahead, lass," Scott said suddenly. "The others will pass the word around to those that can't hear ye."

T'Siri looked at him, one eyebrow raised quizzically as if she were not quite sure that "lass" referred to her. She went to the desk where nearly everyone would be able to see her and spoke evenly. There was intent silence. "I have discovered something in your log tapes of which no one seems to have noticed the significance. There was transporter activity in the engineering section during the last moment before separation, which indicates someone beaming down to LS422-1. The logical assumption is that your captain and first officer were unable to return to the main hull and chose this method of escape."

"Why didn't they call us by communicator?" Uhura asked. "I'll swear there was no call through my board."

"I can think of several reasons, Lieutenant," T'Siri answered. "Do you not think this evidence strong enough to warrant a rescue attempt?"

There was a chorus of yeses, and the faces of all were brilliant with anticipation. Backed up into the corridor, latecomers were beginning to catch up on the news, and a few ragged cheers sounded down the hall.

McCoy stood up beside T'Siri and hollered, "Everybody go back to your quarters and pack. We're leaving as soon as I can find us a ship." There was another loud cheer and the crowd began to thin out. "Uhura, get down to the CO's office and start them looking for something for us. I'll be down in a minute."

"I'm already gone," Uhura grinned, and disappeared.

By now the room was nearly empty; even Scotty had left. McCoy looked across the desk at T'Siri who was watching the last of the crew with interest. "You're not used to Humans, are you?" he asked. "Why did they assign you to us?"

T'Siri came back slowly to gaze at McCoy. "On the contrary, Dr. McCoy, I am quite familiar with Humans. My mother is one."

"Your...mother?" McCoy was dumbfounded. He thought Spock was the only Vulcan/Human, unless....

"Surely you were aware that Commander Spock's maternal parent is Human."

"Sure, I was aware of his mother; I just wasn't aware he had a sister." McCoy found this revelation hard to take in. After six years with a man he thought he knew, surely he'd know if the man had a sister...wouldn't he?

"Obviously, Spock has never had reason to mention me." T'Siri lifted an eyebrow in amusement. It was like Spock not to mention her, yet McCoy seemed to be dumbfounded. It was necessary to explain. "I am two full cycles younger than he, nearly fourteen Terran years. When he left Vulcan, I was four years old." She changed the subject deliberately. "My brother is alive, Doctor; I know that quite clearly. If we are going to find him and your Captain Kirk, would it not be wise to begin?"

McCoy grinned. "I'm going to have us on a ship before you can say Jack Robinson."

"Why should I say that?" T'Siri asked with interest.

"Never mind!" The doctor laughed as he ushered their new addition into the corridor. "Get Spock to explain it to you after we find him."

It was a comparatively warm day by Terran standards, the mild winter on LS422-1 already fading into early spring. They had spent nearly three months on the planet. "Alice" as Kirk had promptly nicknamed it. Much of the time had been difficult, but not unduly so. Their training and equipment had seen them through well enough.

Kirk was only discouraged when he thought of the Enterprise and wondered if she would ever return for them.

At first the lack of communicator and tricorder had hindered their progress. Eventually, as unused skills came into practice, they had explored and worked with increased efficiency and had developed an effective balance of skills. With a permanent camping place near water, a roughly built cabin, and an increasing knowledge of the resources in the area, life became almost comfortable. Yet it seemed to Spock as time passed that the burden of planning and doing came to fall more heavily on his captain.

Time and again Spock berated himself for the error that had caused his injury in the first place. Worse, he knew that they might not even be in this situation if he had not been injured and both of them made unconscious. The time lost by that error had doomed them to being marooned on this distant and unexplored planet. Now, forced by the constant pain of his injured arm to utilize anaesthetic agents extracted from native plants or to retreat to his internal world of mental relief, Spock was ashamed of the time it was necessary to spend on his own behalf. His assistance in the survival effort was far less than he considered his duty or his obligation.

Today, however, they were both up and active in the warm sunshine. Kirk was at one side of their camp clearing, chopping up a log for fuel. He had his shirt off and his back glistened while his arms rhythmically rose and fell with the axe. Spock took up two water containers to fill at the creek. It had been a long while since he had felt resentful with himself for not being able to carry his full load, but he still had consciously to remind himself not to take all the empty containers with him each trip.

Returning with the full containers, he placed them in the lean-to shelter and took the remaining empty ones for their refill. As Spock started back down the path, he realized Kirk was no longer chopping wood in the clearing. His eyes adjusted to the comparative gloom of the forest path, and he saw Kirk ahead of him heading down towards the creek, shirt wrapped carelessly around his shoulders. Spock saw something else, too. The branches of the trees overhead seemed to rustle out of rhythm with the faint wind. Spock set down the container and looked up searchingly. There was something up there, a dark gray shadow crouched low on a sturdy overhanging branch.

"Jim! Look out!" Spock started to run, grabbing for his phaser as he did so. Unquestioning, Kirk turned and looked for the danger. Seeing it as it leaped towards him, Kirk ducked and ran towards it, letting the force of its leap carry it over his head as he rolled. He was back on his feet as Spock reached his side.

"It is returning," Spock warned, and they leapt apart on the path. Through luck or better calculation, the beast's leap brought it down on top of Spock.

Instinctively, Spock brought up both arms to grab the animal's head. He could see it was vaguely cat-like, a gray muzzle with a row of pointed fangs meant for tearing, trying to reach his throat. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was aware that his left arm was not responding properly. He seemed to have no strength at all, and he knew it would not be possible for him to release his other hand long enough to get a proper hold for a nerve pinch. With a burst of energy that was more mental than physical, Spock pushed the animal off balance, wrestling with it and trying to elude the wide, flat paws with claws that tore into his back and legs as it struggled to gain a hold on him.

After a moment, Spock realized Kirk was shouting at him. "Spock, get away from it just long enough for me to get a clear shot. Move, Spock!"

Spock considered carefully which way to roll, gave the cat a final thrust away from him, and tore out of its grasp. The claws raked his back, but he was free. Behind him, Spock heard the whine of Kirk's phaser.

Unable to rise, Spock stayed on his knees, both arms pressed against his stomach. The fiery pain in his arm had increased to the level that took all his control just to prevent crying out. Gradually he gathered enough control to realize Kirk had knelt down beside him and was swiftly peeling the torn shirt from his back.

"Your back doesn't look that bad, Spock. Fairly superficial. Can you get back to camp?"

"My arm," Spock managed to whisper. "I fear I have overtaxed the muscles. I am in considerable pain."

Kirk looked at him as though he admitted to dying on the spot. "If you can tell me that," he said, "I'd probably be screaming by now. You'd better let me help you." Kirk pulled Spock's good arm across his own shoulders and lifted. They both staggered and nearly fell before Spock found his balance, and Spock could not suppress a grimace as the sudden movement sent a burst of pain along his nerves. The short walk back to the lean-to was agony.

Once on his bed, Spock leaned gratefully against the rolled-up sleeping bag. He closed his eyes to concentrate on channeling the pain to a more bearable level.

"Can I get you anything?" Kirk asked, concern in his voice.

"A blanket, please. I am cold." In fact, he was starting to shiver uncontrollably. "Then a few minutes alone."

Kirk tucked one of their blankets around Spock's legs, the other across the injured arm. "I'm going to check on our adversary. I didn't have time just now to see if I killed him or if he's just stunned. I'll leave your phaser here, next to your right hand, in case he comes looking for us. Holler if you need me." Spock did not speak. He had no reserves left. Kirk started off, stopped and looked back as though to reassure himself, then continued on.

Some time later Spock heard a crashing in the underbrush behind him on the opposite side of camp from which Kirk had left. He opened his eyes to be certain it was his captain who was returning and not the cat or its mate.

"Glad to see you are still with us," Kirk said almost questioningly. When there was no response, he continued. "I didn't kill it. I've tracked it out of the area, but the phaser seems to have scared it off." He sat down beside Spock, face lined with worry. "All the time I was wondering what I was going to do if you went into a healing trance."

"I've explained to you before that will not be possible." Spock had to pause between words in order to speak at all. "For the moment all I can do is to immobilize my arm and keep as warm as possible. Captain, will you build up the fire? I am still quite cold."

Glad to have something to do to help, Kirk got busy with the fire. After a moment, he asked, "Would something hot to drink help?"

"Thank you, yes."

"Can you roll over and let me dress those scratches while the water heats?"

Very cautiously Spock rolled over on his stomach, lying on his good arm. It had the added advantage of bringing his injured arm closer to the fire. He was beginning to feel the physical reaction to fighting the pain and closed his eyes. For awhile, he relaxed under the soothing feeling of the medicated creme Kirk rubbed into his back, and then Spock fell asleep.

When Spock awoke long shadows covered the clearing and darkened the lean-to. The rest and warmth seemed to have done him a lot of good, for he was generally unaware of any pain until he moved cautiously. Even then it proved relatively easy to keep under control. It was obvious to him, however, that the central nerve in his arm had been injured to the point that it was going to be too difficult for him to prevent deterioration as he had done so far. Spock wondered just how much longer he would be able to continue to function.

Just out of his line of sight, Spock could hear Kirk rhythmically grinding grain into flour between two large stones. The thought made him hungry. The grain they had found was of low quality gluten that made a flat bread more like a tortilla than raised bread of either Terran or Vulcan varieties. Jim had been disappointed after the pleasure of fashioning the grinding stones, but Spock thought it would taste very good at the moment. He shifted on the sleeping bag and sat up.

Instantly, Kirk was beside him. "Feeling any better."

"Yes, thank you, Captain. I do, however, begin to wonder if I shall ever be warm again."

"I've got that drink still waiting, and some bread. Would that help?" Not waiting for an answer, Kirk brought over Spock's plate and cup. As Spock gratefully downed the drink, Kirk said, "You gave me quite a start, you know, falling asleep like that."

"Even a Vulcan body can only be pushed so far, Captain. The sleep was a necessity. My back is quite healed and my arm has almost returned to what has lately been its normal state." He did not add that medical aid was now vital if his health were ever to return to normal.

Kirk smiled and rose. "You keep on eating. There are a few chores that need doing outside, then I want to close up for the night. Will you be all right alone?" "Quite all right."

Kirk disappeared out the door, and Spock lay back once again, sipping the last of the protein drink. He could feel it sending strength into the weakened muscles, and it induced a mild sort of lethargy in him. After a while, Kirk returned and made a small supper for them both.

They are slowly, Spock still lethargic, Kirk obviously tired. After a silent meal, Kirk assured Spock, "It can't be much longer until someone finds us." He'd said that after supper every day for the past ten.

"I estimate within the next five days," Spock replied, putting a figure into the discussion for the first time.

Kirk's eyes widened. "Five days? What have you been doing - lying here hoping?"

"Not at all. It is computation," Spock retorted, lethargy gone. "It takes into consideration distance, time, expected ship damage...."

"All right, all right," Kirk laughed. "I believe you. Maybe tomorrow then. I ought to go over to the beamdown point and set up the rescue beacon." He leaned back against the shelter wall and put one hand up to his eyes. In the firelight Spock could see clearly the deepened lines on his captain's face, read the fatigue in the bent shoulders that seemed to have lost the youthful vibrance Spock had always associated with Jim Kirk.

Jim's head sank on his chest, and he jerked suddenly as he lost his balance. "Guess I'd better turn in." He yawned, sitting up and stretching. "Time enough tomorrow to decide what to do. Anything more I can do for you?"

If there had been, Spock would not have dreamed of asking. "Thank you, no. I intend to sleep again shortly. I shall see to the fire first."

Kirk stretched out his sleeping bag on the opposite side of the fire. "Good night, Spock." he said and slid down into the bag. In a short time he stopped moving and tossing, asleep, his back to his friend.

For a long time, as the fire burned down Spock remained just as he was, watching Kirk. For the first time in years, Spock was caught up in a situation he was totally unable to influence by personal action. Desperately, though he did not recognize the reaction as such, he wanted someone to take the responsibility for his captain from his weakened shoulders.

Recognizing the existence of a creator, Spock's people had not prayed for thousands of years. They considered God too logical to interfere directly in the actions of any of the billions of beings inhabiting the universe. But McCoy could pray, Spock thought. That one illogical Human could find the faith a Vulcan could not.

More than Jim yet realized, Spock knew that their rescue depended on McCoy's efforts. That abrasive, determined personality had moved official mountains on more than one occasion. Looking once again at the sleeping Kirk, Spock put his hands to his temples and beamed a thought directly at McCoy with all the force he could summon. //We need you now. We are still here.//

Far above "Alice," a small scout ship had moved into orbit, just as Spock had calculated. Dr. McCoy awoke, startled out of the catnap he had been taking prior to their initial beamdown. Needed, he knew that with certainty. He hurried to dress.

McCoy was still fumbling with his boots when the signal at his door sounded. T'Siri entered to his call of, "Come on in."

"I've felt a call from my brother," she said without preliminaries. Then,

looking at him levelly, she added. "You felt it, too."

"Yes, something - a sensation that Spock needed me." He stood up, frowning at her. "Damn, I wish we could get some response on the communicators. You can help me find them, can't you?"

T'Siri nodded. "As we have discovered, it is nearly impossible to locate two specific individuals among the humanoid population of this planet by sensors alone. However, it is logical as an initial hypothesis that they will have remained within the general area of their beamdown."

"But what can you actually do about it?" McCoy demanded. "I've been counting on the skills of the rescue team and their tricorders. But I've an idea you can do something else." McCoy didn't like it. He had never really trusted Spock's undefinable mental skills and trusting his friends' lives to this unknown woman made the doctor very uneasy.

T'Siri met his eyes with a level glance much like Spock's would have been. She knew his turmoil within. Gently, she said, "The Vulcan mind is very distinctive, Doctor. I should be able to contact Spock's mind over quite a long distance if I go alone to the beamdown point."

McCoy was still puzzled. "I didn't think Vulcans had such long distance telepathy. Spock has always had to touch one of us."

"That is true. Vulcan men are touch-telepaths. Vulcan women often have more sensitive telepathic reception. That is one of the reasons we rarely go off-planet. Because I am a hybrid, I have the dubious advantage of the natural Human telepathic shield. With some difficulty, I have learned to control this and use it to advantage in communications. There is a high probability that I shall be able to find my brother with only a slight effort."

Damn, McCoy thought. I already know more about T'Siri than I knew about Spock in a whole year. "You can't go down there alone," he protested. "You've got to take a search team along."

"Negative. There is too much emotion broadcast by Humans. If you insist, you may join me since you seem to have a very strong shield." She turned and headed out the door. "Shall we go, Doctor? We are wasting time,"

McCoy hurried after her, her long strides giving him little chance to catch up. As they reached the turbolift, T'Siri asked suddenly, "Doctor, was there any chance of injury to either Spock or the captain?"

"There was nothing like that in the logs or the reports. All the damage I'm aware of was in the propulsion units, and those contained the chain reaction. Why?"

"I cannot eliminate the feeling that Spock is ill or hurt, under stress not associated with the survival situation." For the first time, McCoy saw her unsure, perhaps a little worried. Then she raised her eyebrows in the Vulcan equivalent of a shrug. "We shall soon see."

When they reached the transporter room, McCoy dismissed the waiting rescue team, over their protests. "T'Siri has an idea she wants to try first. We'll call you if you need to come down." It was all he could say. She had told no one else of her relationship with Spock and McCoy certainly was not going to be the one to do that.

Matching coordinates, McCoy and T'Siri beamed down to find themselves in a clearing surrounded by tall trees turning green with spring. There was no mark to indicate anyone at all had ever been in the area. T'Siri turned slowly, her lips pressed in a thin line. She was obviously casting for something, some aid in beginning her search.

"There is nothing to help me," she announced. "This may take a little time." Carefully, she seated herself cross-legged on the ground, closed her eyes, and placed one hand to her temple.

"Is that all?" McCoy asked in surprise.

She looked at him with an eyebrow raised. "What did you expect, Doctor? Pentagrams and eye-of-newt?"

McCoy grinned. That was more or less what he did have in mind. Then he was struck again by the similarity of T'Siri to Spock, and his stomach tightened. "Go

ahead," he said gruffly. "I'll be quiet."

For a long time T'Siri did nothing, no effort showing on her face. She sat motionless on the purple grass, even her breathing not obvious to McCoy. Gradually, however, he realized that lines of strain were growing around her eyes and the firmly pressed lips were becoming rigid. She began to breathe in short gasps, as if pushing against some sort of obstacle. Finally, she opened her eyes and slowly let her hand fall.

T'Siri shook her head. "I have the impression that he is here, quite close by. However, he is holding himself in deep concentration. At this distance, I am unable to break that mind-set."

"But he's here!" McCoy cried happily.

"Of course he is. I thought you understood that."

"Only intellectually," he answered with a weak grin. "Well, now what? Do you have enough to go on?"

"Negative. I have no sensation of direction." T'Siri sat for a while, thinking. "Perhaps it would be possible to search out Captain Kirk's mind. Since I have never met him, would you be willing to let me look at him once through your mind?" she asked, showing none of the reluctance Spock would have shown in the same situation.

"If necessary, T'Siri," McCoy agreed, not without an irrepressible caution. "I've melded minds with Spock before, but I've never liked it."

"This will be very different, Doctor," T'Siri said. "Concentrate on Captain Kirk for a moment - perhaps on a particular activity that is commonly associated with him. It should be sufficient." She held out her hand to him, fingers parted Vulcan fashion.

"I've never been able to do that, either," McCoy confessed.

"It is convention only," T'Siri answered as her fingers touched his hand.

For a brief moment a picture of Jim came into McCoy's mind: Jim as he'd last seen him on the bridge of the Enterprise. McCoy remembered Jim's last words, "See you later, Bones," and he felt instantly miserable for a moment before he heard T'Siri speak.

"Was that so depressing, Dr. McCoy?" He shook his head. It hadn't been, at least not the way she meant. "Then I shall begin to search out that mind you have shown me." Once again T'Siri began to concentrate.

Very little had changed at the shelter. Spock had fallen into a light drowsy state of awareness and watchfulness while resting. Jim Kirk slept soundly, the sleep of one who was very nearly uncaring of his surroundings, or of one who knew he was being cared for. Suddenly, he began to move restlessly. Still asleep, his hand moved as though to brush away a touch. The motion caught Spock's attention and jolted him to full awareness. Kirk did not ordinarily move much as he slept. Spock rose and went to the door. He could hear or see nothing that could have disturbed Kirk.

Reluctantly, he released his control over his mental barriers and listened with his internal receivers. It was generally difficult for him to touch other minds this way, but he wanted to know if there could be something or someone in the area.

//T'Siri//

Her attention was drawn to him from Kirk. //Spock. Tell me how to find you. Dr. McCoy and I are at the beamdown point.//

"Spock, what are you doing? Are you feeling worse?" T'Siri's contact must have awakened Kirk.

"Not worse, Captain. We have been found."

Kirk was stunned. "There is no one out there, Spock," he said gently. He took Spock's good arm and tried to pull him away from the door.

"Stop distracting me. I must relay the directions to my sister."

A sister? What disordered imagination from his injury could have conjured up a sister.

"I am maintaining a link with T'Siri," Spock went on. "They are down by the

river. It would help if you would put out a light, give Dr. McCoy a visual signal to follow. He can help T'Siri locate the proper path."

Resigned, Kirk decided that some light would only help matters, and went to do as Spock asked. The Vulcan stood as he had, totally still, eyes staring into the forest. Involuntarily, Kirk kept turning to look in the same direction though he could see or hear nothing. How long would it take Spock to realize no one was there?

Then, between the dark shapes of the trees, he actually saw a dot of light moving irregularly along the path leading up from the river. Trance-like, Spock advanced towards it, his hand raised in Vulcan salute. Impossibly, there was a Vulcan woman who hurried forward to touch her left hand to Spock's right. Behind her, Kirk saw McCoy.

Their cries came together. "Bones!" "Jim!"

In their glad rush to pound each other on the back, they pushed past the two unmoving Vulcans.

"Jim, you old son-of-a-gun! I thought we'd lost you that time for sure!"

"Bones, what do you mean leaving me and Spock stranded here for months?"

They turned to Spock just as T'Siri collapsed against her brother's chest.

Spock tried to pick her up but found he could not manage it. "I'll carry her," Kirk offered. They crowded into the shelter and lay T'Siri down. McCoy had his scanners out, checking the woman's vital signs.

"How long has she been in the trance, Doctor?" Spock asked. He knelt beside his sister, one hand resting on her arm.

McCoy didn't think hard about it; he was too busy. "About an hour, I guess." He pulled out a hypospray and pressed it against T'Siri's arm.

"Well, we had to find you." McCoy said defensively. "You didn't leave any signs around the beamdown spot. What did you think we were going to do, start hollering? I don't know a damn thing about Vulcan women."

"Would someone tell me what's going on around here?" Kirk demanded.

Spock still knelt, his gaze fixed on his sister. "T'Siri has been using a form of Vulcan mind touch to locate me. My sister is a stronger telepath than I am."

"I never knew you had a sister," said Jim.

Spock rose slowly and turned towards Kirk. "What's the matter with your arm?" McCoy interrupted, catching sight of the sling. He pulled out his scanner again.

"Neural damage, Doctor." Spock's eyes met McCoy's, warning him not to disclose the severity of the damage here and now.

McCoy stared at the readouts, trying not to let his horror at Spock's condition show in his face. A few more minutes would hardly matter at this point, and if that was the way Spock wanted it, he was not going to argue with a Vulcan.

"May I stand up now, Doctor?" came T'Siri's voice. McCoy looked down at her, struck again by the similarity to Spock's familiar tones. Kirk was closest and extended a hand to T'Siri, who took it and rose gracefully. For a moment, no one spoke.

Finally Spock said, "Captain, this is my sister, T'Siri. T'Siri, Captain Kirk."

"I am delighted," Kirk said quietly, but McCoy recognized none of the usual signs of delight Kirk showed upon meeting an attractive woman. Remembering his own startlement at meeting T'Siri for the first time, he thought he understood.

"I am pleased to meet you as well, Captain Kirk. My deductions as to your location have proven accurate." Her high cheeks were flushed and the tips of her ears green, a sign which in her brother meant he was self-satisfied.

"You have not arrived a moment too soon. I am quite ready to get back to the Enterprise," Spock said firmly. He pulled out his pack and began to load the few articles scattered around the shelter.

"Why, Spock, I thought we were doing quite well here. It's kind of a nice little place, actually." Kirk gave a small smile.

"With all due respect, Captain, I do not believe I could face another meal of protein drink and flat bread."

McCoy had had enough. "No packing. I want all three of you on board now." He

handed a communicator to a startled Kirk. "It's the Lucky Lady, not the Enterprise. Our lady is still in for repairs."

Kirk looked at him oddly and flipped open the communicator.

"Kirk to Lucky Lady," he said, the familiar sound making his heart catch just a little.

"Captain!" replied Uhura. "You are there!"

"Obviously, Lieutenant. Four to beam up. We'll meet you in the transporter room."

Behind Uhura came a chorus of voices, most that Kirk could identify. "Aye, aye, Captain. we're on our way."

Kirk lay on his bunk, hands clasped behind his head, eyes staring beyond the ceiling to grasp the swift-moving events of the past few hours. Dazed from waking in the middle of a sound sleep to find himself suddenly back among friends and headed for home, he had trouble making a coherent whole of the sequence of events. He remembered warmly McCoy's decisive authority sending the two Vulcans to Sickbay and putting Spock through a battery of tests. Then Uhura had shown Kirk to his quarters. There were familiar faces all around, a little blurry around the edges, and all overlaid with the tremendous knowledge that the Enterprise and her crew were safe.

The captain had reached full circle and was starting around again when the door signal sounded and McCoy entered. Bones sat on the chair next to the bunk, glancing around the cabin. A warm smile lit his face. "Not quite the Enterprise yet, is it, Jim? I don't think our ship has even one cabin this tiny." Jim returned the smile and McCoy went on. "Sorry I couldn't get to you right away, but Spock needed immediate attention."

"I know that, Bones. There's nothing wrong with me - that a good leave won't cure!"

"Let me give you a quick check to confirm that."

The next few minutes were taken up with scanners and undignified medical probings.

"Spock knew you were coming, Bones," Jim said. "I'd have given up hope, I think. But he never did."

McCoy didn't look up. "Would you like to come down and see him?"

Kirk sat up too fast and his head swam for a moment. "He's not gone off into a trance yet?"

"Won't do that until he's seen that you're all right. But he will have to be in that trance for quite a while. His arm was very severely damaged, and he might not gain full use of it for some time." McCoy smiled at Kirk's worried expression. "I think he'll recover, though he may need some therapy."

They went out of the room, walking slowly down the empty corridors. "Spock thought he was hiding that from me, but I could see it was getting to be more than he could handle. He was getting very quiet and withdrawn; I'm glad you got back when you did."

"Thank T'Siri for that, Jim. She's the one who really found you." McCoy watched Kirk from the corner of his eye. "Ah...you haven't asked me about her yet. T'Siri will be fine."

Kirk gave a sheepish glance at the doctor. "I can't quite take her in yet, Bones. It seems impossible that Spock simply forgot to tell me about her."

"I've got a couple of ideas on that, but I don't think it's anything to worry about. Look how long it took before he admitted he even had parents!" They came around a corner and stopped by the ward door. "Go on in, but make it brief. And don't ride him about not fixing the damage before this. I already did that; in any case, I don't think he could have managed alone."

Kirk went into the dimly lit room and looked around. T'Siri sat by one of the beds, her hand and Spock's touching in the peculiar two-fingered grasp Vulcans sometimes employed. Spock's eyes were closed until T'Siri spoke.

"Captain Kirk is here now, Spock. I shall leave for a while." She rose

gracefully and with a slight nod to Kirk, left the room.

"How do you feel, Spock?" Kirk asked, sitting where T'Siri had been. Spock's arm was covered with a sort of sling and was hooked up to some unidentifiable medical marvel.

"As usual I find Dr. McCoy's remedies as uncomfortable as the condition they are intended to alleviate."

Kirk grinned. Spock was already halfway back to normal if he could answer like that. "There are a couple of questions I'd like answered, mister. You've been holding out on me."

"Indeed, Captain. To what are you referring?" Spock's eyes widened in mock surprise.

"Nothing important, just a sister in Starfleet who apparently can find you merely by closing her eyes. Afraid I'd trade you in on a better working model?" he asked lightly.

"Hardly," Spock said drily. "My sister is an ensign in communications, not an experienced science officer."

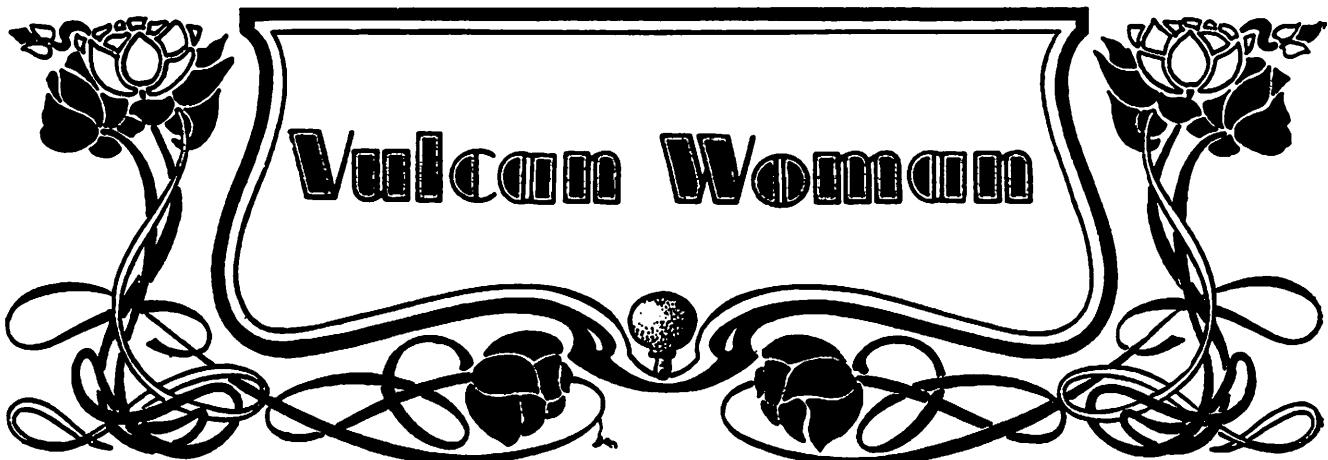
Kirk was tempted to ask him what that had to do with anything, but a stray glance took in the level indicator of the dolorimeter, hovering near the top of the tolerance level. Questions and teasing would just have to wait. "That's enough for now, Spock. I just wanted to reassure myself that you were being taken care of. Better rest now; I'll see you in a while."

"Yes, Captain." Spock closed his eyes obediently and Kirk watched the medical panels over the bed as the indicators adjusted to the level of the healing Vulcan trance.

For a moment, Kirk stood and watched Spock, resting his hand very gently on his friend's shoulder. It wasn't all that bad, he thought. Now that we know the Enterprise is safe, I can feel glad for those months we spent on "Alice"...but it's good to be going home again.

Before he could move, there came a thought, unbidden, like an echo in his mind. We are going home together.

Spock was as glad as he.



T'Siri, daughter of Sarek, stood with her brother silently watching the stars from the observation deck of Starbase 15. Before them rode the time image of a small scout ship, Lucky Lady. Gradually, the image receded, growing smaller as it pulled out of orbit and away from the tracking systems of the base.

"Our own ship leaves shortly," said T'Siri. "Shall we go to the boarding area?" She turned to look at her older brother, but he had not taken his eyes from the

screen. His mouth was a thin line and the muscles in his jaw were clenched as his eyes continued to follow the progress of the little ship. "Spock?" she said again.

With a start, he turned to her, his features returning to their normal expression of reserved dignity. "I am ready," he answered, and they started down the corridor to a turbolift.

T'Siri's long legs automatically matched her brother's stride, but her thoughts were not on the coming journey. Spock had always been a part of her life, although a distant one. Coming home with him now, on leave from Starfleet, she realized how little she really knew about him. Spock did not seem the same person she remembered and she needed to understand. She asked, "Do you think it might have been preferable for you to go to Earth with the Humans?"

"I am the first officer of the Enterprise," he explained. "My duties include providing assistance during the installation of the new warp drive units."

"Dr. McCoy insisted you require medical leave."

Spock looked down with distaste at the sling on his arm. "I would recover just as quickly on the Enterprise as on Vulcan."

T'Siri permitted herself a raised eyebrow. "A starship in dry-dock is no place for a first officer with a non-functional left arm."

"The Lucky Lady will reach Earth in less than two weeks. By then my arm would be sufficiently functional to resume my duties. Nevertheless, the choice was not mine. Captain Kirk agreed with the doctor, and it will be six standard weeks before I may rejoin my ship." There was an odd tone to his voice which aroused T'Siri's curiosity. Cautiously she reached out to him with her empathic touch, only to meet the full force of his personal shields. She could detect nothing.

"It is well, however, that you can return with me to Vulcan. It has been too many years since we have seen each other." They reached the lift as she spoke and T'Siri looked up at Spock. "Now that I am also a member of Starfleet, there are many things I wish to discuss with you."

There was suddenly less of the officer and more of the brother in Spock when he answered. "Your presence was unexpected. I had not been informed of your decision to enter the service."

"Father did not approve of my decision as he did not of yours. When I completed the science academy and applied for a commission, he refused to sign my papers; I had to wait until I reached the legal Federation age of consent. I have been on ground assignment with Vulcan Space Central for the past three months."

"That will change now, will it not?" The turbolift arrived, the doors snapped open, and they headed for the shuttle dock.

"Indeed. This rescue mission presented me with no measurable difficulties in living with Humans, unlike most Vulcan women. As soon as I return to duty, I shall apply for a starship assignment." T'Siri found it took a great deal of control to keep from broadcasting her excitement over this prospect to the entire space station. There are difficulties in being empathic, she reminded herself. However, the subject was dropped and the inconvenient emotion subsided with the formalities required to board the passenger liner at the dock.

Late that night, however, as she watched the viewscreen in her cabin, the emotions came back to her. As she prepared her long hair for the night, the stars passed before her, sparkling and shifting in the ship's warp field. How can I not come back, having traveled once among the stars? she wondered. Her deft fingers braided the loops she wore down her back as her thoughts relived the short journey she had already made into space. I shall be back, she promised herself, no matter what.

Five days later, when Spock and T'Siri arrived at Vulcan, it was planet night over ShiKahr. In the warm darkness, they walked from the spaceport to a nearby tram station where they could board one of the personal cars that traveled along the loop around the circular city.

Coming home seemed to have overwhelmed Spock for the moment. Every comment he made was short and to the point, and he did not seem to be talking to T'Siri at all. It had been many years since he had been home, and most of the visits T'Siri could

remember had been short and marred by disagreements with their father. Nothing had changed that she could determine, and she thought that this discord with their father might explain Spock's reluctance to leave the Enterprise.

When one of the few late night cars finally answered their call, dawn was growing over the desert to their right. T'Siri took that side of the car, watching with interest as colors changed on the distant mountains and clouds gathered over "Grandfather Peak." It was some time before she turned back to Spock. When she did, T'Siri caught her breath at the expression on his face.

Spock was gazing out the window toward the city, totally oblivious of her or the car. She had seen small boys with similar expressions on her visit to the spaceport. On Vulcan one learned to conceal delight and sorrow ordinarily, but Spock was visibly happy. T'Siri was glad to know that this homecoming was not a mistake.

"Spock?" she said softly.

He turned to her with a jerk as though he had forgotten her existence. The reserve returned to his face, and the joy in his brown eyes began to dull. T'Siri reached over and touched his hand as it lay on his knee. Spock drew away as though her touch burned.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I apologize," T'Siri said quickly, stricken at having crossed his personal barriers uninvited. She felt she had to explain. "I am a good example of why Vulcans do not touch each other. In addition to my more usual telepathic abilities, I am an empath." She said it very softly. The Vulcan word for empath, lal'kebel, could be extremely obscene if said with a certain inflection.

Spock did not appear to be horrified by her revelation. "Fascinating. Why has no one told me of this?"

"T'Pau considers me an insult to the family. Lal'kebel was not expected to appear in our bloodline." T'Siri strengthened her controls, shielding her bitterness from her too perceptive brother. "I have been very carefully trained to keep this hidden."

"I see," Spock began, but the car had pulled off the main loop of the tramway and onto one of the spurs leading toward the core of the city. "Come," he told her. "We shall speak of this later."

As they walked down a familiar pedestrian way, long shadows stretched before them across the paving stones. Ahead rose the gray stone walls of their family's home, at a distance seeming to be merely a single rectangular block. T'Siri had always been intrigued by the way towers and peaks appeared to grow as one drew nearer, and one's perceptive changed. "Do you remember teaching me to throw, using rocks aimed at the north turret?"

Spock sighed with embarrassment and looked up towards the peak. "I do. You had a powerful throwing arm for a three-year-old, but your eye-hand coordination was not well developed."

"Mother said it was 'poetic justice' when I broke your window." T'Siri recalled with amusement.

"After Father insisted I replace the window myself, I confined your lessons in throwing to the desert."

"Where I continued to find things to damage, even my brother," T'Siri reminded him.

As she spoke, they had come up before a circular opening in the gray stone. Spock set down the case he carried and reached into a smaller aperture to one side, pulling down a metal handle. The gate slid into the wall and a light came on in the still-dark courtyard. Before they could walk halfway up the path, Amanda appeared in the doorway. Her face lit up, and she started down the path, calling "Sarek!" behind her as she hurried toward them.

"Spock, T'Siri, what are you doing here? We've only just had word that you were found." They all touched hands in greeting. "Spock, what's wrong with your arm?"

"Minor neural damage, Mother. It is healing well, but Dr. McCoy insisted on

medical leave. When the Enterprise is back on patrol, I shall return to duty." As he spoke, Sarek walked out onto the step. He waited as the others came up to him.

"Welcome, Spock," Sarek said, his voice as calm as always. "T'Siri, I see your mission was successful."

As father and son touched hands briefly, T'Siri watched each face closely, seeing no sign of disagreement. More importantly, her empathic awareness found only such feelings as were appropriate to the situation.

"What are we standing here for?" Amanda asked. "Come inside. Have you eaten, either of you?" She led the way into the house, followed by Sarek and Spock. T'Siri did not follow immediately but remained in the garden a moment longer to reinforce her control. For the first time in her adult life, her family was complete. If she did not want the whole neighborhood to know that, she was going to have to work at controlling it.

Unlike Spock, T'Siri was not on leave and was due to return to duty the following morning. Reluctantly she bid her family an early good night and went to prepare for the journey back to Vulcan Space Central.

It had been a long time since T'Siri had used these rooms as her own, but they still had the comfortable feeling of home. The large windows faced north, as did most of the others in the building, to escape the relentless Vulcan sun. It was this peculiarity which led to the necessity of the many peaks and turrets she had noted from the walkway. As she thought of that, the warm feeling T'Siri had experienced with Spock then returned, and with that came the longing to be in space she was beginning to know well. Pulling aside the curtains, T'Siri let in the starlight.

Having changed and packed, T'Siri was preparing to meditate when there was a knock at the door. It was Spock. "Perhaps I am too late," he said, seeing her in the short tunic she wore for sleeping. His eyes were taking in the appearance of the room. She wondered if he were remembering the few times he'd joined her there.

"No, it is not too late." T'Siri motioned Spock to join her in the seat by the window, noting that he was as drawn to the dark sky as she was.

"I said we would talk later," he reminded her. "Now will be the ideal time if it is not an inconvenience. You will be busy when you return to the base."

"I do not see what there is to talk about. I have an unfortunate affliction, a handicap if you will. Talking about it will not cure me of it."

"You consider it a handicap?" Spock stretched out his long legs, the folds of his tunic falling to either side as he made himself comfortable.

"Not always." She looked at him fondly, thinking that his crewmates should see him like this, relaxed and out of uniform.

Spock looked up, startled. "I picked up that thought, T'Siri, and the accompanying amusement. Your gift is strong indeed, if you can pass my controls so easily. What else are you capable of doing?"

"I can make you experience the amusement as if it were your own emotion." She demonstrated, and Spock looked exceedingly uncomfortable. "Do you see why I call it a handicap? Unless I am constantly on guard, everyone around me will be aware of whatever I am feeling."

"I fail to see how that control differs from that which all our people practice."

T'Siri turned away from Spock. "I have not yet learned how to make it unconscious. I am always forcefully suppressing a part of my being. Yet, there are compensations. Even though I can receive other people's emotions as easily as I can send, I have learned to block these with little effort. I don't know why it works in one direction and not the other, but it has kept me sane. And I find I am able to work with Humans with no trouble."

"I would not have thought Vulcans would cause you such problems."

"You would be wrong, Spock. Vulcans control their reactions, but the emotions still exist. You would be horrified to know what I feel in a room full of totally controlled people who have no idea I can pick up something they are barely aware of. I feel like an eavesdropper."

There was a sensation of dismay from Spock, instantly suppressed. She gazed at him with sad patience. "Can you ever feel comfortable with me again?"

Spock shook his head, contrite. "I was not reacting to you, my sister. It is merely that my own control is not as complete as I wish."

"You are no different than anyone else, except perhaps a little harder for me to read. It is possible that your years among Humans have improved your control." Briskly, T'Siri decided to change the subject. "The benefit is a gift with languages. I have an A rating in communications, even though I am still an ensign."

As she intended, the conversation drew away from herself and into less personal channels. They talked until late into the night; one of the first truly adult conversations they had ever had. She had been only a child when he left home, and his visits often left no time to talk to small sisters.

In many ways Spock was quite like what T'Siri expected him to be. Yet the feeling that there was something different about him persisted. T'Siri had not told him the full truth about her empathic reception. Short of total unconsciousness, it was not possible for her to screen out completely the emotions of others. To her surprise, she could read almost nothing of Spock. Startled by this, she had prodded a little at him and had discovered an insurmountable barrier. T'Siri guessed that somewhere deep inside him there was an emotion that he was fighting to deny. It disturbed her that he could form an emotional block so strong that his basic reactions were affected by it. Yet her logical side reminded her that his constant relationship with Humans aboard ship might be all the explanation necessary. Hoping that there might be an opportunity some day to discover the truth, T'Siri consigned these thoughts to the back of her mind.

Reporting back to Vulcan's Starbase, T'Siri found herself out of contact with her family. The site was on the opposite side of the planet from Shikahr, alone in a desert where its presence would not upset the delicate balance of the Vulcan ecosystem. As was usual for a planet-based installation, the duty schedule of the staff was adjusted to the planetary calendar and the customs of the indigenous people; stardates were ignored by the station personnel while being encoded automatically into official records by the computer. T'Siri calculated the date on which the Enterprise would return for Spock and put her mind to her duties, not expecting to see him unless she could arrange enough leave to return home.

It was summer at the base. Late one afternoon T'Siri came off duty and returned to her quarters more fatigued than usual. The day had been long and very hot within the confines of the base. Glad to reach the cool of her room, she started to strip off her uniform as she came in the door. It was then she noticed Spock reading at her desk.

He looked up, one eyebrow raised at her evident discomfort. Torn between pleasure at seeing him and annoyance at seeing him now, she demanded, "What are you doing here?"

"I had an appointment with the base medical officer. There are some things we need to discuss." She noticed that he was no longer wearing the sling and that the movements of his left arm seemed more natural.

T'Siri nodded slightly. "Excuse me for a moment." In her bathroom, T'Siri finished stripping off her uniform. Hanging from a hook was her sul-ken, and she hurriedly pulled it over her head. She was letting her hair down as she came back into the room. "It would be a vast improvement if Starfleet uniforms could be made suitable to the various base climates. These synthetics are impossible no matter what the weather is."

Spock listened tolerantly to her complaint as she settled herself in the other chair. Then he set down the book he was reading and introduced his own topic.

"I have picked up some of my correspondence at the commandant's office, and I have received a query from Captain Kirk which concerns you."

"Me?" At the same time she was aware of a deliberate walling-off of emotion from Spock, a rebuff so strong that it almost distracted her.

"He has written to ask if I thought you were ready for deep space duty...and if you would wish to be assigned to the Enterprise."

It took T'Siri a moment of conscious effort to control her immediate and positive reaction. "I do not understand why he would ask you. Would such an assignment not have to go 'through channels'?" she asked.

"Indeed. It is merely the captain's way of asking if I would object to having you aboard," Spock explained.

"I see. Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Object."

"That is of no importance."

"Of course it is, Spock. You are the first officer, as well as my brother. I would not accept an assignment to your ship if you were unwilling." The hope that was growing in her was becoming almost too difficult to control, and she knew she was not keeping it from Spock.

"I do not foresee any problem presented by your presence aboard the ship. You could indeed, become an asset."

T'Siri nearly smiled and quickly bowed her head. "Thank you, Spock. I want to go, for so many reasons. Can your Captain Kirk really arrange that I be assigned there? What if he checks my record and does not want me?" In her excitement she reached across the desk and put her hand on his arm, sharing her feelings in sensation as she had done as a child. Her mind was crowded with thought of ships, stars, her own fantasies of other planets.

"Carefully, little sister, you are showing too much," Spock gently chided her. She withdrew her hand. "Do not be concerned. If Captain Kirk asks, he has already read your record and made inquiries. He is only being careful of my personal wishes."

"I stand corrected. It is said that James Kirk is a superior captain. Have you found him so?"

The warmth Spock had begun to share was suddenly blocked by the curious withdrawal. He stood up and walked to the window. "You must judge for yourself, T'Siri. I will not influence you." Spock shifted the robe on his shoulders and turned back to her. "What I originally came to ask is if you are interested in coming with me to the dulo ceremony for T'Sarna. We have never before had the opportunity."

"I am interested, if that is your wish."

"I am curious," Spock admitted. "Shall I see to the details?"

"Whatever is convenient, as long as I have time to arrange for leave. Is there anyone else from our clan going?"

"Sepek and T'Lene are considering. I have spoken to no one else." Spock picked up the book from her desk and tucked it into a sleeve pocket. "I would prefer to walk out to the site, if you are willing. That will require an extra three days. You might request the time before the plans are final." She nodded, and he went on. "I must leave. I drove the groundcar to the transporter station, and Mother needs it to attend a meeting."

"Just like the old days," T'Siri commented lightly. She held up her hand. "Until later, Spock." He met her fingers briefly, yet she felt the negation of his feelings quite strongly. She watched him leave, troubled by a concern deeper than before, and hoped that these few days together might provide an opportunity to discuss it."

T'Siri began her evening meditations by remembering the purpose of a dulo ceremony and who T'Sarna was. The dulo was the Ritual of Remembrance, held in honor of some person who had died for the glory of Vulcan. T'Sarna had been the youngest sister of Surak, the greatest philosopher and father of Vulcan thought. In the earliest, most bitter days of the Reforms, T'Sarna had been killed while acting as her brother's emissary for peace. Over the centuries since, the dulo in her honor which Surak had begun continued to be held at the sacred grounds of Surak's clan. It was now customary for brothers and sisters to attend together at least once before leaving their homes and world. T'Siri knew this might very well be the only chance she would ever have to attend.

In deference to Vulcan tradition, the schedule at Space Central was flexible enough to accommodate the various demands of clan duties and rituals. While Ritual Leave was automatic for all civilian workers, Starfleet personnel had to request their leaves. These were customarily permitted. For T'Siri, a senior daughter of one of the high houses of Vulcan, there was never any question of her availability to fulfill her ritual obligations.

On the other hand, T'Siri had only been an ensign for a very short time. After a series of calls between the base and ShiKahr, plans were finally settled for a walking tour that would not be across the open desert. They would follow roads and stay in hostels along the way, thereby saving nearly a full day on each leg of the journey. At this time the weather in these latitudes was still favorable, and such a trip could be accomplished easily.

They started out from ShiKahr quite early, walking in silence. T'Siri used the time to study her companions and try to remember what she could about them. Sepek was the same age as Spock, a childhood companion who had gone through the Kahswan Ordeal at the same time. Seeing him now, T'Siri decided that he was the closest thing to a cheerful Vulcan that she knew. He seemed to know everyone, was slightly overweight, and had a variety of stories and the most decided opinions of anyone of her acquaintance. Sepek's work was mostly in trade: food commodities and agriculture. Amanda had often said that if he lived on Earth, he would probably sell insurance. T'Siri didn't know if that were a compliment or not, but it intrigued her that Spock still considered Sepek his closest friend on Vulcan.

T'Siri also found Sepek a congenial companion although he seemed to have forgotten much of what he had been taught concerning emotional and mental restraint. She could read his emotions from a distance of two meters, which often interfered with her own control.

Sepek's sister was very much his opposite. Since the journey began, T'Lene had spoken to no one. Older than T'Siri and younger than Spock, she consequently did not know either one of them very well. The only positive thing T'Siri knew in T'Lene's favor was that she was considered successful as an instructor for the very youngest children at the primary education center. Those children apparently responded well to her care, but T'Siri as yet had seen nothing in T'Lene to respond to. She sighed, wondering if it might not have been better for her and Spock to go alone.

She was still wondering about it when they decided to stop for the night. Although some hours of daylight still remained after the evening meal, neither Sepek nor T'Lene was interested in going on. After a while, T'Siri was glad that this had been so. As darkness grew in the garden surrounding the hostel where they ate, other young Vulcans joined them and settled down near the fountain. Someone began to play a recorder, someone else a lytherette. One by one the others joined softly in the ancient chants.

"We seem to be the oldest people here," T'Siri remarked. There was a long pause before T'Lene's hesitant voice answered from the darkness beside her.

"Indeed. Sepek and I made our first pilgrimage here when I was only ten years old. I had not thought to come again."

"Why did you decide to come now?"

"Spock asked Sepek, and my brother decided that we should join you for this trip. Spock has been off Vulcan for a long time."

"When I was ten years old, Spock was already at Starfleet Academy. He is gone much of the time," T'Siri agreed, wishing that it were not so.

T'Lene looked across the garden where the two men were walking around the hostel perimeter, shoulder to shoulder. "Alike, yet unlike," she said with interest. "Is Spock always so reserved?"

At the note in T'Lene voice, T'Siri shrank within herself. Does every woman I know have to be attracted to him? she wondered. "He has been under a strain, and it has made him quieter than usual," she replied, then went on quickly. "Tell me about the school where you work, T'Lene. Have you begun to present the language program for the younger children yet?" That topic kept both of them occupied until

the lights in the hostel were dimmed for the night.

Everyone in the hostel soon sought his bed for the night or a quiet corner for meditation. T'Siri began her own evening ritual with a sense of accomplishment at having reached T'Lene. Perhaps at the end of this trip they would have made the beginning of a lasting friendship.

The weather on the next day began dark and oppressive, and the desert wind made the heat dry and stifling. Again they walked silently, being passed and passing other equally quiet groups all with the singular objective of reaching the next shelter as quickly as possible. It surprised T'Siri when Sepek, who had so far walked exclusively with Spock, suddenly dropped back to talk to her. It was doubly surprising that his first question was personal. "T'Siri, is Spock in good health?" he asked. His face did not show any concern, but she could feel it behind his words.

"I believe the neural damage from the accident is well healed, Sepek," she replied. "I know of no other physical problems. Do you have a particular reason for asking?"

"No specifically, yet at times I have noticed that he does not appear to be paying strict attention to our conversation. Spock's thoughts are elsewhere, and that is not like him."

"Spock is concerned about the Enterprise. He considers it his duty to be there to supervise the repairs, despite the refusal of his physician to permit it." T'Siri was more disturbed than she admitted. On top of her own observations, she could not dismiss the concerns of Spock's friend lightly.

"That's what he says." Sepek made a negative gesture. "I have known Spock a long time, and I know there is something more serious bothering him now. Whenever he has a problem, his mind continues to work on it to the exclusion of the business of daily life."

"If Spock requires our aid, he will let us know," T'Siri pointed out.

"Will he?" Sepek countered. "You must surely see how independent he is."

"Yet Spock considers you a close friend," T'Siri ventured cautiously.

"More of an obligation, I believe," Sepek replied, and T'Siri sensed strong overtones of rueful amusement. "When we were very young, in school, I did not treat him with what adults consider the proper respect. I ridiculed him about not being able to master a simple nerve pinch. When he finally learned how to do it, I was unconscious for a considerable period and he began to assume that he had killed me."

"I have never heard about that." T'Siri was greatly amused.

"I am sure he never told anyone. Neither of us desired a reprimand. I only allowed him to attempt it because I was sure he could not do it."

"A faulty premise."

"Indeed."

As they had been speaking, the road had begun to wind its way into the foothills. Spock and T'Lene, in step and far ahead, were occasionally out of sight as the road turned. T'Siri and Sepek rounded a bend just as Spock and T'Lene turned suddenly, running back to them.

"Dust storm!" Spock called above the roar of the wind. "Find cover."

They ran back along the road, searching with practiced eyes for shelter from the coming storm. As they headed towards a pile of boulders against a road cut about 200 meters behind them, the rising wind began to pelt them with desert dust and debris.

"Over here," Spock instructed, indicating a hollowed out cave on the far side. His starfleet training had helped him to take subconscious note of the sheltering rocks and remember them in case of future need. T'Siri wished she had done as well.

It was not a large space, however, and they were forced to crowd in far more closely than any Vulcan liked. Miserably, T'Siri drew back from the others as far as she could into her own little niche. She hated dust storms and feared them, and under the best of conditions, was only just able to control her reactions. Now she was far out in open country with others who did not know of her fear. I am going to

start shaking in a moment, she thought. Gritting her teeth, she began to recite, I will not fear; it is a cloud that overshadows all thoughts. I will not fear. There is no fear.

But she was afraid - of the howling wind, the sand, and the stinging particles that cut into her skin like tiny knives. Both sets of her eyelids were shut tight against invasion.

//There is no fear.//

A touch against her trembling back, then against her mind. T'Siri would have jumped if she had not been controlling herself so tightly. //Spock?//

He continued to shield her mind with his own. //I remember, little sister. The night you were born was such a night.//

//It is so hard to control.//

//Will you let me block the fear for you?//

//I must learn to control it.//

//Just for now. We are not alone. They will become aware of your distress.//

T'Siri did not respond immediately, and Spock withdrew to permit her to consider. At least thinking calmly about the fear helped to reduce it, and for the first time T'Siri realized that she had become more afraid of her fear than of the storm itself. //Spock?//

//I am here, little sister.//

//Spock, can you help me not to dread my own reactions?//

//That is a simple thing. We must create a new response to the condition. Since the old litany does not seem effective, I shall try another for you.// He was silent for a moment. //Try this now. When there is time, we shall create a new one for you alone. "My fear can strengthen my own fear." Can you repeat that?//

Already Spock's calmness was influencing her. T'Siri repeated the words slowly to herself, feeling as she did that her pulse and blood pressure were returning to normal. //It will work, Spock. You will not have to create another. These words have a positive association with peace and calm.//

//That is good.//

//Thank you, Spock.//

//Thanks are not necessary.//

//Yet I am grateful. My fear of dust storms has been a trial to me since I can remember. No one has ever been able to help me before; they can barely stand to be near me.// She paused. //Are these the words you recite?//

//It is like that. I have also found the old litany ineffective. Perhaps our Human heritage accounts for such a strong fear reaction.//

//Where did you learn the new words?//

Spock did not answer immediately, and she sensed a shifting of his mental defenses. //It is derived from my knowledge of Humans// he told her finally. //They often enjoy fear, consider it a challenge. Captain Kirk once told me that it can give you strength.//

Suddenly the total emotional block reappeared, the same negation of feelings that she had felt in him so many times now. //I see,// she thought slowly, and he did not respond. She took a moment to analyze, finally realizing that Spock's reaction was strongest when he mentioned his captain. How very odd. She opened her outer eyelids to look at him. He was sitting next to her, head bowed and hands tightly clasped in front of him. Very cautiously she reached out again. He's miserable, she thought, and pulled away. She did not understand what it was that was affecting him so painfully, but she was concerned. T'Siri wished fervently that he could develop a little of the emotional understanding she had been born with.

The storm lasted late into the night, and eventually the travelers camped where they had sheltered. Early the next morning, they set out on their journey, forced to hurry because of the delay. The dulo was beginning as they reached the Shrine of T'Sarna, and they were separated as they sought places at the back of the large natural amphitheater. The bell banners signaled the silence, and the sibling pairs already seated touched fingers in the accepted gesture. T'Siri held out her hand to Spock, who touched her fingers slowly. The ritual had begun.

The ceremony itself was of little importance. At first the words were so archaic that T'Siri was only just able to follow them. Spock, she thought, was probably not following them at all. Eventually the words became clearer and the Matriarch of the presiding clan read aloud the words of Surak on the death of T'Sarna. As she spoke, it had become the custom that the sibling pairs would join minds briefly, the melded consciousness strengthening their already close bonds.

Spock's thought came to T'Siri hesitantly. At first there were merely impressions - superficial pictures of his life aboard the Enterprise. A little deeper were strong thoughts about his work and the people he knew. Her own projections were of the same and, reflecting mostly on her job at the Starbase, but with the excitement of knowing she might soon be assigned to a starship.

Yet that was all. When T'Siri tried to go deeper and give more of her own self, she ran directly into the barrier she had met in Spock so often before. It did not fade before her entreaties to go further. Even the unhappiness she had touched the day before was buried, and there was no thought that touched the man, Kirk, at all.

//Only so little, Spock?// she protested.

//There are things in me that must remain mine alone.//

//Will you share nothing more?//

//More than this is not necessary. You and I are strangers, T'Siri.//

//I am your sister.//

Spock made no reply, turning his attention back to the Matriarch, but T'Siri was not willing to let the matter rest. Concern for her brother made her ask. //Why do you treat me as if I were someone who had no meaning in your life?//

//I treat you in a perfectly correct fashion.// he answered reluctantly.

//Correct, yes. But it used to be much more than that. I know I could not be wrong. When I was small, when I had to learn the painful lessons of our way, it was you who dried my tears and did not scold. You showed me the way you had found and offered it to me. How I used to live for the times when I could see you again.//

//I am not the same. Those tears were twenty years ago.// Spock's answer was bitter. If there was any warmth in him, T'Siri could not find it.

//Yesterday in the storm you offered of yourself the strength I needed, knowing how best to help me, just as you always have. This is the perfect chance to grow from those distant beginnings into real sharing. Why did you ask me to come here if you are not willing to take that step?//

//You are pushing too hard, T'Siri. Do not trespass where you are unwelcome.//

//You have become hard as the desert rock. What has happened to you that all the compassion, all the tenderness you used to show me are buried deep beneath this barrier that you cannot, do not wish to move? Starfleet has done something to you, something terrible and wrong!//

//Starfleet has nothing to do with this.//

//Then what? Where is your heart behind that Vulcan reserve? Is there nothing in your life that means something to you?//

Turning on his heel, Spock grabbed her arm and pulled her close. //Who or what I may or may not care for is not the subject of anyone's concern but my own. You are pushing where you may not come. Is that clear?// His eyes were bright, burning, with the emotions she had feared buried deeply.

Twisting her arm free, T'Siri stepped back and looked at Spock steadily. //It is clear. I shall respect your privacy if that is your wish. I cannot stop being your sister, however. If you need me, I will be here.// Unable to manage her barriers any longer, T'Siri left him to seek privacy, anywhere out of the contact of the many others at the shrine.

In order to find that privacy, T'Siri was forced to walk back along the route they had just come in by. There she found a tiny stand of Red Dagger cactus where she felt out of touch with the many others who surrounded her at the shrine. T'Siri sank down gratefully and rested her head in her arms. She wanted to curl up and become one with the rocks, where no emotions existed and troubles were far away.

I am a Vulcan, she thought with determination. Spock's attitude should not disturb me. But she knew that it did. He had been her idol for years, and she

valued his opinions above anyone's. What had changed him so? Six years earlier, the last time she had seen him, he had not been so unyielding. That had been a good visit, even if she had defied her father to arrange it. And of course, she had joined Starfleet because of him. He seemed to have found a place for himself in the universe, one that she could share in as well. Now, he seemed to have betrayed her belief in him.

With an effort, T'Siri pulled her thoughts away from such profitless speculation. For some time she recited her litanies and regained a sense of peace and control. By noon, she was once again in command of herself, ready to face the others. She stood up and stretched, then walked slowly back to the road.

Spock was waiting for her there. "Are you all right?" he asked quietly.

"Yes." T'Siri stepped beside him, and they walked back along the road to the shrine.

"I was surprised at your reaction, T'Siri. If I had anticipated these difficulties, I would not have attempted this visit.

"You were still thinking of me as a child."

"That is probable." He gave an uncharacteristic shrug. "Shall we remain for the evening program?"

"Sepek and T'Lene will not wish to leave, and I admit I would be interested in seeing the entire dulo." She gave him a sideways glance, but his eyes were fixed on the distant mountains. "We may never come again." She held up her hand, and after a moment he touched her fingers, familiar, courteous, and distant. For the rest of the day, T'Siri controlled her hurt and anger, now knowing what Spock kept inside himself. They did not attempt to touch minds again.

The journey back to ShiKahr was uneventful. Spock spent most of his time talking with Sepek or T'Lene, while T'Siri stayed in her own thoughts. It was a relief to T'Siri finally to reach the calm of her room at home. There, waiting on the desk, was a notice from Starfleet. She dropped her pack and opened the cassette with excited fingers. There were her new orders assigning her to the Enterprise.

Immediately, she headed for Spock's room and tapped on the door. There was no answer. Knowing that he also had gone directly to his room, T'Siri was sure he was meditating. Still, she would have liked to have him with her when she went to tell her father. Drawing her controls tight within her, T'Siri went to Sarek's study. When she handed him the communication, Sarek read it over, then looked up with narrowed eyes.

"I was not aware you had applied for starship duty, T'Siri."

"I applied after I returned from the rescue mission. When I left the base last week, I had not yet been accepted."

"Surely you know I will not grant you my permission to go off-planet."

T'Siri swallowed hard, but her voice was firm. "I am a Starfleet officer. Your permission is not required, Father."

"Our tradition demands my approval as long as you are a member of my household. I fail to see the necessity for you, or any Vulcan woman, to choose an off-world way of life."

"Life on Vulcan is changing, Father, and even the Vulcan Way can no longer be restricted to one planet. With my own particular gift, I can never follow Vulcan tradition unreservedly." Unable to face her father with the next words, T'Siri turned to the garden window. "All my life I have considered your wishes. Obediently, I attended the Vulcan Science Academy to pursue my communications and linguistics studies instead of Starfleet Academy,. I have tried to remain here as you wished." T'Siri took a deep breath. "I have decided that I must now look beyond Vulcan. I do not ask your permission, Father, only your acceptance. I shall go in either case."

"Your choice is not logical," Sarek replied, forgetting that T'Siri could feel the force of his anger behind his words. His right hand was clenched on a stylus, his left balled into a fist on the desk.

"It is logical for me; it is simply not traditional. The two do not have a

mutual identity."

For a long time, Sarek did not speak, and T'Siri did not attempt to interrupt his thoughts. Finally, he asked, "Do you anticipate devoting your life to Starfleet as Spock has?"

"I do not know," she answered. "I do not look beyond the three-year initial tour of duty."

"Before you decide definitely, will you come and discuss it with your mother and me?" Sarek had made a concession, and it touched T'Siri strongly. He was trying not to make the same mistake he had made with Spock, the error that had driven father and son apart for eighteen years.

"I will," she promised. "I am not trying to defy you, you must realize."

Sarek gazed at her with an odd expression. "Neither you nor Spock try to do that; it merely happens. You have been honest with me, T'Siri, and I am grateful."

"Thank you for understanding, Father. The Enterprise will be here next week, and there are many things I must see to. May I be excused?" He nodded, and she turned to go, thankful that he had not asked about the dulo. She would not have known what to tell him.

T'Siri had returned to the Starbase by the time the Enterprise arrived at Vulcan, and she left directly from the transporter station there, knowing that Spock would leave from the space port. Once aboard, she was greeted by a tall, thin woman dressed in command gold. T'Siri was struck by the match of the woman's hair to the tunic and almost missed the other's cautious smile.

"Ensign T'Siri? I am Nela Robbins. Mr. Spock assigned me to help you get acquainted with the ship. I'll be your roommate."

T'Siri nodded politely. "Thank you, Lieutenant. I have never served on a starship before. Your assistance will be welcome." T'Siri started to gather up her luggage, but could not refrain from a curious look around the transporter room.

Nela grinned at her, suddenly more at ease. "I know it won't take you long to settle in." Grabbing one of T'Siri's bags, Nela headed for the door. "Come on. I'll show you where our cabin is, and you can put away your things. Sorry to say, but your first duty will be a complete physical. Dr. McCoy is very particular about those. Besides," she went on as they reached the turbolift, "I think he's excited about having another Vulcan aboard for professional reasons. Starfleet issued us special equipment just to handle Vulcan physiology this mission."

"I look forward to seeing him again," T'Siri said.

"Say that after you've had the physical," Nela remarked.

After a detour that seemed to cover most of the ship, they finally reached Sickbay. Dr. McCoy greeted T'Siri with a wide smile as he ushered her into the examining room.

"It's so nice to see you, Ensign. You're going to get the full treatment today. You're my first victim, and I'll get to try out all my new toys."

T'Siri looked at him warily, wondering if he might be teasing. McCoy was cheerfully laying out scanners on a bedside stand. "I go on duty in fifteen minutes," she said.

"No problem. When I give an exam, it is a duty. All right, take a deep breath and count to ten." All the while he ran his scanners over her, McCoy kept up a running commentary. "Ah yes, just like Spock," he said as he checked her blood count. "Almost non-existent blood pressure, too. Wish I knew how you did that." This was followed by, "I'll never understand how you two can breathe with lungs like that." Then a wide-eyed stare. "What is that? Oh, I see. Spock couldn't be expected to have a reading like that. Not on a male."

T'Siri still wasn't sure about the teasing. She began to feel the stirrings of alarm and decided it was her turn. "I take it you are a fully qualified medical doctor?" she asked finally.

McCoy grinned. "Sense of humor a bit better developed than Spock's; full of cute little sarcastic remarks. I'll have to make a note of that. All right, over here and start running on the treadmill till I tell you to stop."

Sarcasm? Since when does Spock have a sense of humor? she wondered. Since when do I have a sense of humor? Similar disturbing thoughts occupied her mind while she was running.

Finally, McCoy stopped her; she was hardly winded. "That's it for now," he declared with a shake of his head. "You look as healthy as a Taurean bull dancer, but I'll let you know for sure when the lab tests are complete."

I am definitely going to have to study Terran idioms, T'Siri decided. "Am I free to go?" she asked.

"Sure, run along and play. Nela's waiting for you in the outer office." McCoy looked up from writing on his clipboard. "Spock back yet?"

"I do not know," she replied in a clipped tone. "He was not at the Starbase when I left." T'Siri pulled on her boots and headed for the door quickly to forestall any questions.

It took T'Siri several days to settle down to a twenty-four hour day and the routine of the starship as well as familiarize herself with her duties. The efficiency, competence, and dedication of the Human crew impressed her. For several days she was constantly being stopped in the corridors and greeted in some fashion, almost everyone, of course, outranking her. Initially, she put this down to simple curiosity. Gradually, it was borne upon her that it was more. Almost everyone said something like, "We are so glad to have you with us. Working with Mr. Spock has been a wonderful experience." Because of her own empathic awareness, T'Siri knew that they were not just being polite. They were truly glad to have her there without knowing her, simply because she was Spock's sister. As illogical as that conclusion seemed, it was true, and therefore, it could not be denied.

T'Siri quickly realized that her experiences with Humans had been far too limited, and that despite her mother's example, she had secretly maintained the Vulcan viewpoint that Humans were only slightly more civilized than the Klingons. The error of this assumption grew more and more obvious each day until she finally abandoned it for good at a party she attended on the fifth day out from Vulcan.

It seemed that the crew were always having little parties for one obscure reason or another. At this event she met Anne Svec, Nela's roommate prior to T'Siri's arrival. Anne was a tiny thing with dark hair who barely reached T'Siri's shoulder. T'Siri had difficulty remembering that this was not a child but a Starfleet officer.

"I apologize that it was necessary for you to give up your quarters," T'Siri commented politely.

"I didn't mind at all," Anne said with a shrug. "We all talked about it and decided that Nela would be the best roomie for you. We realized what an adjustment you would have to make to room with a Human, and Nela once studied for six months on Vulcan."

"I was under the impression that Mr. Spock assigned Nela to assist me," T'Siri said, surprised by this consideration.

Anne grinned. "It was sort of a mutual arrangement," she said as another crew member joined them. The direction of the conversation changed.

T'Siri did not forget what had been said. Little by little, the crew came alive for her, showed her who they were; and their openness made her respond in kind. Unlike Spock, T'Siri quickly learned to observe Humans without feeling threatened and to accept them. By slow degrees she came to feel at home aboard the Enterprise.

T'Siri had been on duty for over two weeks when Captain Kirk called her into his office. Aware that she was not at fault in her work, T'Siri asked Nela why Kirk would want to see her. "Just to get acquainted," Nela said cheerily. "He thinks he should know everyone by sight as well as by name."

"I do not believe he would need to see me separately for that. He could hardly confuse me with anyone else."

"Well, I guess you are a little obvious. But he'll treat you exactly like everyone else just to prevent talk."

"Talk?" That surprised T'Siri. "You mean gossip. Why would anyone gossip about me?"

"Because of Spock, of course. The captain won't want you or anyone else to think he'd treat you specially because your brother is his first officer. Nor does he want anyone else doing it. Kirk never works that way, and he won't let anyone else on his ship do it either."

"I see," T'Siri said slowly, and the subject was changed. However, she wasn't really sure about it. She had expected a certain amount of prejudice against her merely because she was a Vulcan on a Human ship. What she had never even thought about was the reverse: favor because she was Vulcan. It was a novel idea.

When T'Siri arrived in Kirk's office after going off duty, he was at work reviewing a stack of reports. He gave her an absent smile, his mind coming away from ship's business with difficulty. "Have a seat, Ensign. Thank you for coming."

"At your service, Captain," T'Siri said as she took the seat he indicated. As Kirk finished signing the last reports, she looked around curiously. There were few items of personal use around, and the room seemed spare and businesslike.

"There!" he exclaimed as he put the last report on the pile, and his smile grew into a grin. "Glad I'm done with that. Don't ever be a captain, T'Siri. Half of what you do is worthless."

"I am quite satisfied with my duties at present, sir." T'Siri thought he might be teasing but was more in awe of him than of McCoy.

"Settling in okay, are you? Good. I know it isn't very exciting just at the moment, but we'll be reaching a newly discovered star system in a couple more weeks - there are still more surprises even this close to Federation territory - and you may get more to do."

"That will be interesting, certainly." T'Siri put a firm damper on the excitement she felt and paid strict attention to her captain. They chatted a short while longer, then Kirk put a surprising question to her.

"T'Siri, this isn't directed at you personally, but it is important for me to know. Was it a mistake to bring you aboard the Enterprise?"

"I do not understand."

Kirk rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'm thinking about Spock. He's always been so alone, and I don't think it could be good for him. Vulcans really are a social people after all. Getting you aboard seemed like a really good thing for him or so I figured, and it would make it easier for you to adjust to have another Vulcan on board your first ship as well. But it doesn't seem to be working. If anything, he's been even quieter and harder to reach since you got back. I thought it was the influence of Vulcan and would wear off after a bit, but it hasn't." His clear hazel eyes were looking at her steadily, concern filling them. T'Siri wanted to draw away from him, refuse to answer. It was difficult to overcome her conditioning and discuss her brother with a virtual stranger.

T'Siri forced a reply. "There are no difficulties between my brother and myself." That was all she felt comfortable in saying, but Kirk saw right through her.

"There is something bothering him, isn't there?"

"Yes," she had to answer, reluctantly. "However, we have not discussed it, and I am not sure what it is."

"Do you think there is anything I can do?"

T'Siri did not know what to tell him. She was quite sure that there was something Kirk could do since he seemed to be at the root of the problem, but she had no idea what it could be. It hurt to know that she could not help her brother while this Human could. T'Siri drew into herself a little and Kirk seemed to sense this.

"I'm sorry, T'Siri. I'm asking things of you I have no right to ask."

"You are the captain; you must be concerned for your officers," T'Siri replied. "I regret I have no advice to give you."

Kirk rose behind the desk, and T'Siri followed suit. "Thank you for coming, Ensign. It has been most useful talking to you and I'm pleased you are settling in

well. Feel free to come any time if the need arises." It seemed to be his usual "welcome the ensign aboard" speech, and T'Siri relaxed. Then he shifted gears on her. "And if you figure out how to help Spock, let me know. I'm getting worried about him."

T'Siri froze, blocking out the worry he was projecting at her. "I shall consider it, Captain. Good day." She turned quickly and left the room, but before the door closed behind her she heard Kirk resume his seat with a heavy sigh. As she made her way to her room, T'Siri wondered if there was a solution to a problem no one was quite sure yet existed.

The Enterprise was currently assigned to an arm of the galaxy on the side of Federation territory opposite from the Klingon and Romulan Empires. In that sector only thinly occupied by solar systems, barely the most preliminary work had been initiated. The Enterprise would be the first starship to investigate the areas the drones and probes had identified as worthy of interest.

The first objective of the Enterprise was a Sol type star with a family of twelve planets. Probe surveys of three of these planetary bodies had generated enough interest to warrant more extensive study by the starship's scientific teams. None of the reports indicated any need for T'Siri's linguistic skills, but she was fascinated by her first direct contact with alien worlds and eagerly studied the reports of the survey crews.

The orbits of two of the worlds had them in close proximity, while the third was on the far side of their sun. Spock determined it worthwhile to study the two at the same time with the expected result that the various teams were in constant action while the ship's services crew found themselves with light duties and free time. By the time the crews reached the third planet, an ice-covered world most distant of the three from the sun, T'Siri had no difficulty in persuading one of the crew leaders to let her come along. Another hand with the tricorders and a strong back to carry equipment were always useful.

Readings from the ship's sensors had indicated that life on this planet existed mainly in a narrow temperate band surrounding the equator though life in the seas extended further toward the glaciers far to the north, and she did not expect to see any animals on the site. It was a surprise for all of them, therefore, when they materialized from the transporter beam directly on top of a small, burrowing colony of mammaloids. As the Starfleet crew took shape, the raccoon sized creatures fled in all directions, squealing in fright.

"Hey!" cried Sayers, beside T'Siri. "We ought to catch a few of these and take up some specimens. Xeno-biology will want to take a look at these; they didn't think we'd find anything up here." He grabbed a small animal that scurried between his feet, and several of the others followed his example.

Carstairs, leader of the group, vetoed the suggestion. "Forget it, Sayers. We'll notify x-b, and they can get their own crew up here. We've got a glacier to investigate." He led the crew off in the direction of the determined observation point while the crew began to deploy their equipment.

All afternoon, in between making readings and moving sensors around, T'Siri was aware that the little animals remained on the edge of her vision. If she looked obliquely, she could see a curious row of piquant faces peering at the busy crew; yet if anyone turned to look directly at their location, there were no animals there at all. At the same time, there was something nagging at her consciousness that she could not identify. After Carstairs reprimanded her for inattention the third time, T'Siri resolutely barricaded her mind and gave the tiny creatures no more thought.

It was nearly dark and the geology crew was packing up to leave when four members of a zoology crew beamed down to join them. "Hey, Carstairs, what've you got?" demanded Lt. Wiegert. "We've got a report you've found some animals around here."

Carstairs handed T'Siri the case he was packing and wiped his forehead. They were all sweating from exertion despite the increasing wind chill. As dark grew nearer, the weather was beginning to worsen. "Yeah. When we beamed down, we

scattered quite a batch of them. They've been shadowing our footsteps all day."

"Show us where."

Carstairs and the four zoologists disappeared over the ridge and into the sheltered depression where they had first startled the animals. T'Siri wanted very much to cross and see what was happening; she could hear shouts and scuffling noises and finally the high-pitched whine of a phaser several times, followed by silence. Shortly, Carstairs reappeared over the ridge. He was sucking a bite on his right hand.

"You'd better get your glove back on, sir," Sayers reminded him. "Wind chill is at minus twenty degrees."

"Nasty little beggars," Carstairs remarked as he pulled on the glove. "We found quite a nest of them in a cave, young ones most likely. Some of the bigger ones were determined not to let us take any specimens. Wiegert had to tranquilize the little ones and stun some of the bigger ones." He winced as he moved his hand. "Me, I like rocks. They don't bite."

The rest of the geology crew gave a small laugh and drew into position for beam-up. It was quite dark by now, the wind gusting up to 85 kph. Sitting on a glacier in the dark was not even a geologist's idea of a good time under those conditions.

As quickly as she could, T'Siri shed her cold weather gear and stowed the equipment she'd been carting. The cold weather had taken a great deal of effort to combat, and she was starving, needing a warm meal and a hot drink to replenish her energy. Yet as she ate, the image of those piquant faces peering over the ridge kept recurring to her, and the remembrance of the nagging consciousness bothered her. As soon as she was finished, T'Siri headed down to the bio lab to see the animals again.

Only one lone attendant was in the lab when she appeared. Ensign Leung was calmly laying out food by each specimen cage where each small creature lay unconscious on the bottom. She gave T'Siri a smile.

"How do you know what to feed them?" T'Siri demanded.

Nhadine gave a shrug. "We know from their metabolism that they need water, and we've put out a selection of several native plants that seem appropriate. We trust they'll make their own selection when they awaken."

"Why aren't they awake now?"

"Carstairs seems to have thought he was stunning an elephant. He gave them a heavy dose. The tranquilizers on the little ones had a better effect. Some of them have come around already, taken a drink and gone back to sleep." She gestured toward a couple of cages. "They made a small amount of noise at first but gave up pretty quickly. Here, if you're not doing anything else, give me a hand with these bigger ones. I don't know when any of the regular zoology staff will be here to help. Mr. Spock has everyone still available at the survey site on the surface."

T'Siri assisted for a short while, but she soon had to leave to attend to some of her own duties. As she left, the larger animals were beginning to awaken. In particular, one small female looked around the lab. It just doesn't seem justified, T'Siri thought as she walked toward her duty station. Have we any right to frighten them so, even in the name of studying them? She gave an amused shrug, thinking what her brother would say to that and put her mind on her regular duties for the first time that day.

"T'Siri, wake up!" Nela cried. "Please wake up. You're crying."

T'Siri awoke in her bed with her roommate shaking her. With difficulty, she focused her eyes on Nela, her mind still captivated by the experiences of her dream. Then realization struck. While she had been asleep, her barriers had been pierced. The implications frightened her. "No, it is not I," she insisted hazily. "Someone else on this ship is crying. Their despair came through to me." She frowned slightly, trying to sort out the dream from the reality.

Nela sat on the edge of the bed and studied her Vulcan roommate. "I don't understand."

T'Siri returned the look for a moment, then ventured to explain. Nela had been a good friend to her and deserved an answer. "I am an empath," she said softly, rubbing at her temples with the tips of her fingers. When she looked back up, Nela's eyes had widened in amazement.

"I didn't think Vulcans could be empaths." She accepted the fact quickly. "If you are, someone may be in real trouble."

T'Siri scrambled out of bed and began to dress. "Come with me. I can locate who it is, but as I get closer, I may need your aid."

In the corridor, T'Siri began to cast about for the source of the call, using all her will power to search for the source rather than block out this overpowering emotion. To her relief, the direction seemed to be from below her feet and not from Spock, as she had first feared, since he was the only other telepath she knew to be on board. Suddenly she knew. Running for the turbolift, she called back over her shoulder to Nela, "Get Captain Kirk and have him meet me in the bio lab. Hurry!"

Outside the lab, T'Siri paused to gather her strength. The sensation of despair had lessened as though the sender had been exhausted by the intensity of the emotion. She went into the room quietly and turned up the lights. Before her, in the specimen cage, was the intelligence that had reached out - the small mammaloid female with such sad eyes.

T'Siri opened the door but made no attempt to touch the little creature. She sat down on the floor in front of the cage, assumed a meditative pose, closed her eyes, and opened her mind. The fur-covered alien scrambled down from the high table and crossed the floor to T'Siri, holding out tiny hands.

//Tell me// was T'Siri's only thought, and she listened.

The next T'Siri was aware of was a hand on her shoulder. She turned, bringing her mind back to the lab, and looked up into questioning hazel eyes. "What is it, Ensign?" Kirk asked.

"They are people, Captain." T'Siri rose, the little female clinging to her legs like a tiny child hiding behind its mother's skirts. T'Siri went on, "We have put people in our specimen cages, and they are very frightened of us."

Kirk's face went pale, then red with anger. He spoke without turning. "Nela, get Spock down here on the double. Heads are going to roll." With a little effort, he subdued his temper and held out his hand to the small alien. "Will you tell her for me what a terrible mistake this has been?"

"You may tell her yourself, Captain. I shall transmit for you." T'Siri drew Kirk down on the floor beside her. "Take my hand and form the words in your mind. This one is hardly more than a child," she cautioned him. "She was responsible for caring for the others, just babies. You can reassure her. I shall soon have enough awareness for the translator. We should be able to go below then and repair any damage we may have done."

When Spock arrived at the lab, he understood little of what he was seeing. The group on the floor was unaware of his presence, and Nela had not explained to his satisfaction what T'Siri had said. Reluctantly, Spock seated himself behind his sister and captain and placed his hand over theirs, absorbing the silent exchange until the group link dissolved.

"Children!" Kirk exclaimed bitterly as they rose. "We've kidnapped children and put them in cages. Can you imagine what those parents are going through right now?"

"We had no way of knowing," T'Siri began, and Kirk turned on her with blazing eyes.

"Somebody should have known!"

"There was nothing in the reports to indicate the presence of an intelligent life form," Spock said stiffly. "A mistake...."

"Mistake!" Kirk shouted. "Who the hell allowed such a mistake? Spock, I want answers now, and I want a remedy before you can count to twenty in Vulcan."

T'Siri felt her brother flinch. Kirk's anger was hurting him. His hands clasped behind him, Spock faced the captain with rigid back. "Johnsgard and Bandara are zoology and ethnology team chiefs."

"Lt. Robbins, have Lts. Johnsgard and Bandara and their reports in my office in fifteen minutes." Kirk spoke without turning. "Mr. Spock, you and T'Siri are to take our little friends home at once. As soon as you are back on board, I want to see both of you. I'll have ethnology alerted and on this job. They ought to be able to handle it now that we know what we've got." He turned on his heel and stalked out of the lab.

As Kirk stalked out, T'Siri crossed quickly to the cages and opened the rest of the doors. She and Spock helped the tiny babies down from the tables, where they clustered around the female and one or two of the other larger ones. Nela said softly, "I don't understand, T'Siri."

T'Siri had forgotten her roommate was still in the room. She answered as she lifted down water dishes and set food on a low shelf. "It is difficult for me to know precisely, but we seem to have located some sort of communal nursery for a band of primitive, intelligent life forms. You are familiar with *australopithecus*?" she queried, and Nela nodded, joining T'Siri to help. The little creatures were eagerly accepting food from the older ones.

Spock spoke suddenly. "If nothing else, this shows some primitive intelligence. They are not eating like animals; see the orderly distribution of the meal." It was an observant comment, exactly what T'Siri would have expected Spock to say. But he was stiff and seemed eager to leave the room. "I will go find a cargo sled," he added. "These infants cannot be expected to walk to the transporter station." He disappeared out the door while T'Siri watched with concern for a moment. Then she turned her attention back to her charges, trying to decide the best way to explain what she and Spock would be doing.

By the time the sled materialized on the planet with T'Siri and a cargo of fury babies, dawn had arisen. It was very cold, and T'Siri shivered in her heavy jacket. The sound of the transporter whine attracted the attention of the older members of the community; apparently they were sentries of some type, and in a short time the sled was surrounded by a curious and not very friendly band of adults. While babies scrambled off the sled and joined their parents, T'Siri and her young friend walked across to the leaders of the group. This was going to take a lot of explaining.

As T'Siri settled down before the small people, the whine of the transporter behind her showed that Spock and the chiefs were now arriving. Forget the prime directive and communicate, she told herself severely and reached out to the older individual before her.

For the next several hours, there were constant trips between the planet and the ship as embarrassed science teams tried to remedy the dismaying failure. In his heart, Jim Kirk knew that with such early intelligent forms this obvious interference might have serious consequences - or none at all in the long run. More than once, he had thundered, "Long leave is no excuse for anyone to forget his job," while knowing that he had been just as guilty as anyone else. He should have caught those incomplete and inadequate reports at the first sign of life where none had been expected. Yet he comforted himself with the realization that Spock had also missed this tell-tale sign. Kirk intended to tease his friend about it some time in the future when it was all worked out and the problem solved.

Finally back at his desk, Kirk was re-examining the reports when Spock returned to his cabin. Kirk looked up to him with a smile of relief. "Thank God for T'Siri's receptivity, Spock," he said. "I hate to think what would have happened if we hadn't discovered the error so quickly." He rubbed his forehead tiredly. "Is she still down there?"

"Yes, Captain," Spock responded formally, and Kirk gave him a quizzical glance. Spock only barely met his eyes, then continued, his gaze on the wall behind Kirk's head. "There can be no excuse for my failure properly to monitor the science teams. I might have prevented this incident. I respectfully request that you assign another officer as coordinator for this project."

Kirk stared at Spock, amazed, wondering what Vulcan philosophy could be responsible for Spock's outburst. He chose a non-committal tone of voice and spoke

lightly. "That won't be necessary. I don't agree that there was any more fault on your part than on mine. Even you can't know everything all the time." He grinned, pulled himself up, and came around the desk toward Spock. "You'd have caught it eventually if T'Siri hadn't."

"I cannot agree, Captain. It is, of course, your decision. May I be excused?"

Spock was once again the stranger he had seemed so often since the return from Vulcan. "Dismissed," Kirk started to say slowly, not knowing what else to do. His first officer turned toward the door just as it opened to admit T'Siri. She backed up before Spock, and Kirk could see the two Vulcans staring at each other as the door slid quickly shut.

Kirk stood alone, wondering what in space had happened. For as long as he had been captain of the Enterprise, Spock had been at his side. In moments like this, of crisis and stress, he was accustomed to looked to his friend for information and support; now the help he was used to receiving was not forthcoming. Kirk couldn't remember feeling so alone.

Spock attempted to pass T'Siri without speaking, but she could feel a wave of pain from him too strong to disregard. Taking his arm, she asked, "What are you doing?"

"Leave me alone." He pulled his arm away savagely.

"Not this time, Spock. There's something here I do not understand. Are you going to walk out of that room and out of his life? He will not take this outburst from you, and he should not have to." T'Siri still did not understand, but she knew there was more at question than an error made in the course of duty. "You have made mistakes before; you will make more in the future - if you are still in Starfleet."

"I refuse to discuss it with you."

"Then go back and discuss it with him. Spock, he needs you." The closeness that existed between her brother and his captain could not be explained, but it was very real.

The door opened again, and Kirk hurried out. He stopped in surprise to see Spock and T'Siri still standing there. "You'd better come back in," the captain said after an uncomfortable silence. T'Siri almost pushed her brother back into the cabin.

No one spoke as the three officers found seats. Once again at his desk, the captain leaned forward, his hands clasped together on the top, while his eyes shifted back and forth between the two Vulcans. His brows were drawn together in a puzzled frown. T'Siri could feel him worrying, wondering what to say. Spock gave no sign of encouragement at all. Against her will, T'Siri found herself sending Kirk a little feeling of support. He looked at her with wide eyes, then nodded with relief. Rising again with determination, he came around and sat on the edge of the desk in front of Spock.

"I had started out to find you, Spock. I...." He stopped, an odd smile, which he instantly tried to conceal, crossing his face. "I'm sorry. This isn't funny, but I was just thinking what a stranger you still can be after all these years." It was affectionate amusement, T'Siri noted. She wondered if Spock could tell that. "Spock is not your full name, is it? I don't even know your real name."

"It is the closest anyone Human can come to," Spock said bluntly. There was a brief silence as Spock looked over to T'Siri, then spoke the collection of Vulcan syllables that were his full name. Kirk's face showed total non-comprehension. "It means: Spock, son of Sarek, of the House of T'Nor." Spock offered no more, and T'Siri crossed her arms with a little sigh of exasperation.

"Spock, what's wrong? I want to understand. I thought you were my friend, that I could count on you. It's been...years since I had to ask you for your help. You've always just been there. All those years you said you were loyal to me as your captain, and I thought it was just camouflage. Was it really true? Have you been observing a 'fascinating' specimen going through its emotional changes?" Hurt and anger were starting to grow just beneath the surface of Kirk's calm.

"You do not understand...not any of it." Spock's voice was cold.

The anger flared. "Then you'd better explain it to me, mister, or start

thinking about a transfer. I won't be a pet specimen."

Spock shrank before that anger, and that affected T'Siri more than she would have thought possible. "Let me help," she said to her brother.

He turned to her, his eyes so dark with pain as to be almost black. "This is between the captain and myself." At the raw emotion in his voice, Kirk stepped up to his first officer, forcing the Vulcan to look at him. He held out both hands, helplessly.

"All right, it is between you and me; something personal that doesn't have a thing to do with what happened tonight. Spock, what have I done? Won't you at least tell me that?"

"You?" Spock rose and stepped back, away from Kirk's threatening closeness. His Vulcan training was warring with a desire to respond. The latter won. "You have done nothing. The fault is mine." Kirk froze, staring at a stranger who stood before him with jaw set. He realized he had better not push on those Vulcan barriers again for a moment, but what could he say?

"Spock, an Orion gypsy once told me that a man can have only two, maybe three, true friends in his entire lifetime." Forcing calm, Kirk slowly returned to his desk chair and sank into it. "I've been luckier than most. I love being with people, and most of them become friends. But if I ever had to choose, have your friendship or anyone else's - there wouldn't be a choice. You above them all, Spock, and that still holds true." He finally looked back up and met Spock's eyes. "Nothing can change that. I thought you knew."

"Jim...." It was barely a whisper, and Spock lifted one hand to his temple, seeking mental strength. "Jim, I have failed you so many times recently. How can...friendship...overlook such inadequacies?"

"When? How do you think you failed me?" Kirk's face was a study in bewilderment.

"I could not prevent the damage to the Enterprise. I mistakenly short-circuited the wiring and was injured. Because of me, you were stranded. And because of my injury, I could offer no assistance in our survival efforts."

"You said it yourself; you were injured."

Spock went on with dogged determination. "I was not even permitted to assist in the repairs to the ship; you sent me to Vulcan...."

"Oh, Spock," Kirk said softly, "that was for your sake, not mine. You think I didn't miss your help?"

Voice low and husky, Spock continued, unheeding. "Now I have made another serious error, one which could damage your career. If I am no longer able to serve you adequately, I can see nothing in myself that is deserving of your friendship."

T'Siri could listen no longer. Reaching across the desk, she took one of Kirk's hands in hers and held her other out to Spock. After a long moment, his fingers met hers in the light Vulcan touch.

Before either could speak, T'Siri closed out her conscious awareness of them, the room, time itself, and opened herself as a conductor between the minds of the two men. Forcibly, she drew them down into the third level of consciousness where minds merged beyond the need for verbalization.

T'Siri's presence refused to permit the two to maintain their customary defenses. Each was forced into awareness of the other's thoughts, each seeing himself through the mind of the other.

Kirk, more accustomed to confrontations on an emotional level, did not draw back. Spock, however, unsure of what Kirk was offering him, refused to accept the image of himself Kirk projected. He pulled away from the meld saying, "I am not like that." Yet T'Siri could feel that at last his barrier of defense had broken down. She stepped back, and Kirk took her place beside Spock.

"You are, you know," Kirk said gently.

Spock shook his head. "A thousand things you have done for me: made every possible concession, trusted me when others could not. There is so little I can do of equal importance; yet when the opportunity presented itself, I failed."

Kirk was at a loss for words. Behind him, he heard the door open and knew

that T'Siri had left. He was on his own. "There are no such debts in friendship," he began slowly. "This is misplaced guilt, Spock."

"Guilt is a Human emotion," Spock hedged.

"Shit!" Kirk burst out, "any creature able to identify right from wrong can feel guilt." The idea appealed to him, and he elaborated on it. "You've become fond of the Enterprise, her crew, and...I hope...her captain. But you've convinced yourself that by Vulcan standards the things that mean the most to you are wrong. You're using all these irrelevant excuses to relieve your guilt complex." He added softly, "Caring isn't wrong."

"It is wrong," Spock claimed miserably.

"Then quit."

"Captain?"

"I mean it. And take T'Siri with you so we won't contaminate her, too."

"Jim." Spock's plea was a hoarse whisper, and Kirk felt pity move him.

"Spock...Spock, maybe I don't know much about Vulcans, but I do know you, and I'm learning to know T'Siri, too. Why can't you simply accept what you are - that there are two sides to your nature and one of them is Human? For what it's worth, I even know that some of your emotional reactions must be Vulcan in origin. Your people have demonstrated loyalty, kindness, gentleness. By definition, those are not entirely logical reactions. They're emotional ones. Maybe they learn to control their emotions, but they don't fight them. Because that, my friend, would be impossible, which makes it illogical."

"You make it sound quite simple, Captain." Spock was beginning to relax and Kirk felt the tension in his back and neck muscles fading.

"Glad you think so," he said lightly.

"I should like some time alone to consider this." Spock rose and turned to the door.

"No, Spock. It isn't something you can work out alone. Don't retreat where I can't follow."

Spock looked directly at his captain and their eyes met. "All right, Jim. Let it be on your terms." Kirk grinned with relief. Everything was going to be all right now.

When T'Siri left the captain's quarters, she leaned against the corridor bulkhead for a time, thankful that there was no one there to see her. Finally, she made her way to the turbolift, the corridor seeming to fade in and out around her. She felt sick and shaken. I am not suitably prepared for this, she thought.

The turbolift deposited her on her own deck, but the walk to her cabin took longer than she remembered. Fighting a force she could not see, she walked through the tall grasses of a Vulcan savannah. There seemed to be sky, red and glowing from horizon to horizon. From somewhere behind her a lematya screamed.

"No!" she told herself firmly. "The door to the turbolift has closed." She reached her cabin and collapsed on the bed, shutting her eyes against two sets of visions, her cabin and Vulcan. Exhausted, she could not even remember where she had put her bottle of kylira, that one treatment that could help her regain her mental equilibrium. Without even realizing it, she fell asleep instead.

//T'Siri?// Spock's thoughts touched her from the corridor.

//I am here.//

The lematya screamed again. With difficulty, T'Siri opened her eyes and looked up. Her brother was standing by the bedside.

//Are you well?// He reached down and touched her forehead. //You need the kylira. Where do you keep it?//

She struggled to remember. //In the bathroom.//

Spock disappeared, and T'Siri sank back against her pillow. The rest had helped her, but her thoughts were still confused. For a moment, Spock had looked like her father instead.

//You have gone beyond your endurance// Spock scolded as he returned and poured out the appropriate dosage. T'Siri took the small cup of liquid and swallowed it

with a barely hidden grimace. Spock managed a tiny smile, and T'Siri smiled back. Then he sat beside her, to wait while the remedy took effect.

As T'Siri's mind cleared, she slowly began to realize that her brother's emotional block was gone and with it the severity of his control. Spock was open to her, his hand against hers brought comfort and understanding.

"What made you do it?" he asked finally.

She shrugged. "I am your sister, and you needed the help I could provide."

"No, there is no logic in giving so much of yourself in such a personal way. It seems that you followed your Human heart, little sister, instead of your Vulcan mind."

"I think not, Spock. I think that I helped you simply because I could do nothing else. Your feelings and his were too strong; I had to do something or go mad. I could not shut them out."

"I am sorry, T'Siri. Yet I am greatly in your debt for helping me to regain my touch to reality."

"The knowledge of myself which I have gained will eliminate any thought of debts between us." T'Siri struggled to sit up, her head almost clear.

"I should like to know, if you can tell me."

T'Siri considered. "How it has been for you," she said after a moment, "I do not know, but I have always considered myself fully Vulcan. I have never given my Human half much thought other than to feel satisfied that I did not seem to have any troublesome Human emotions." Their eyes met, Spock's amused, while concerned. "I have always been very aware of everyone else's feelings and have paid very little attention to my own. Yet now I realize I have ignored one whole side of myself."

"It is something I have been aware of since I chose to go through the Ordeal at age seven," Spock sighed. "It is always there for me."

"I did not choose the Ordeal, Spock; I just did it. But since I have been aboard this ship, I have been seeing mirrored in the Human crew some of the things that are in myself. Tonight, watching you and the captain, I could not stay apart. You called forth emotions in me I could have sworn did not exist." T'Siri shuddered and pulled the blanket around her shoulders.

"Emotions can be...difficult...at times," Spock replied. "If I had not allowed my feelings to overcome my reason, I would have not created a problem where none existed."

Thoughtfully, T'Siri said, "But if you had understood your feelings better, you might have examined them rationally, and you would have pulled yourself out of the depression on your own. Earlier you would not even admit that a problem existed."

"Not until your intervention forced me to face it," Spock agreed. "You are not the only one learning about emotions tonight, T'Siri. That we can discuss it in this manner indicates we have both been given a lesson."

"I am going to keep on learning," T'Siri resolved. "I came aboard the Enterprise because I wanted to find a place for myself in Starfleet just as you have. Now I think I shall learn about more important and immediate things, such as what it truly means to be both Human and Vulcan. I want to know all I can about my Human heritage and so perhaps understand myself that much better."

"It will not be easy."

"No, but there is time."

Spock rose. "Tomorrow, if you wish, I can begin to make up to you the days I could not share before. Will you join me in meditation?" T'Siri nodded her acceptance. "For now, you must rest and regain your strength. May you find peace in your sleep, T'Siri."

"And peace come to you as well, Spock." The kylira had begun to make her lethargic, and T'Siri could not keep her eyes open. Her mind filled with images of the future. T'Siri slept.





# *Argument + Acceptance*

## **Friendship:**

It is a difficult concept -

That one individual can become so important that the significance of all others is diminished by comparison.

It is illogical -

Yet what is true cannot be denied.

It is not Vulcan -

To care deeply is an emotion to be ended, not encouraged and treasured;

To trust his judgment so completely under all circumstances can never be justified by reason.

Still, The Tradition requires that one's superior is due loyalty and obedience,

And Vulcan warriors once swore oaths of interdependence as t'hy'la.

He is my Captain. Can I offer anything less than my best, whenever he requires?

Nor is it human -

For human friendship is a superficial layer often concealed by self interest and personal advantage. Concern for others may not extend from the lips to the heart.

"He is your superior officer, nothing more."

Two men, officers on the same ship, are expected to be rivals for position and power.

I can understand. Such thoughts are more Vulcan than my people would willingly admit.

Yet, what need have I for position? It awaits me on Vulcan should I choose to accept it.

And I have no desire for power other than I hold now, able to warp space and shift stars, shaping the universe.

My desire is to learn, and I do not need to be Captain to do that.

## **Friendship:**

In giving his to me, he has taken away something from my spirit. The more he gives, the more I need.

And what I return comes back again manyfold, a never ending loop.

Obeying neither logic nor emotion, together we create our own definition, a unique solution for a relationship neither human nor Vulcan.

He is my captain and my friend.

I am grateful for that.



# Last Mission

"Captain, may I speak with you for a moment?"

Jim Kirk, captain of the Starship Enterprise looked up to the open door of his cabin. "Sure, Spock," he said to his Vulcan first officer. "All I'm doing are these rotten reports that Commodore Stocker expects when we clear the base. What's on your mind?"

Mr. Spock entered slowly and stood formally before the desk. "I would like your advice, Captain. They have offered me command again."

Jim chuckled. "They never give up, do they? Which one is it this time?"  
"The directorship of the Vulcan Science Academy."

Jim felt his face fall. "That's different, isn't it? What have you told them?"

"Nothing yet. I wanted to talk to you first." Spock was standing rigid and controlled before him. "I am finding it difficult to make a decision on the matter."

"I had always figured you would remain on the Enterprise as First Officer until I left. Tell me, how often does this position come open?"

"The current director has been on duty for 27.4 years, Vulcan time, Captain," Spock answered. "The average length of duty for a director there is approximately twenty-five Vulcan years."

"It would be a pretty long time until they offered it to you again, wouldn't it?"

"I do not believe I would have a second opportunity."

Jim stared at Spock thoughtfully, wondering what was going on in that alien mind. He wanted to cry, "How can I run the Enterprise without you?", but a little voice in the back of his mind prevented the emotional indulgence, one which might encourage Spock to stay against his better judgment.

"How soon would you have to leave?" Jim asked instead.

"Six months and three days." Spock was volunteering nothing, giving Kirk no clue to his feelings.

A little puzzled, Jim asked, "Why are you having trouble making up your mind? Which do you consider most logical, to go or stay?"

"I want to stay," Spock said with a rare flash of his personal thoughts. "I joined the Service to serve on a starship, and I have done that successfully for many years. However, nothing remains static. Our five year mission is nearly finished, and I can not expect that you will remain only a captain for much longer. When you are promoted, I will still have this decision to make."

"And then, the directorship will no longer be available, and that is what you want to do," Jim finished for him.

"I would prefer it to being a ship's captain."

"So going is most logical, isn't it. Bring me the papers when you get them, and I'll sign them, of course. And Spock, congratulations." Jim swallowed the sense of loss and smiled.

For a long moment Spock said nothing. He seemed oddly hesitant, as though doing the logical thing somehow was not what he had in mind. Then he said slowly, "Thank you, Captain." And he left.

Later that day when Kirk beamed down to Stocker's office, the subject wasn't mentioned. Instead Stocker asked, "Jim do you remember Elaan of Troius?"

"How could I forget?" Kirk asked. "That incident embroiled the Enterprise in quite a little skirmish with the Klingons. We only barely made it out alive."

"It's back in our hands again. Lately we've discovered the only real difference between the people of Elas and the Troians was their degree of sophistication. We've been getting regular reports from our people on both planets that indicate the Troians can be just as cut-throat and vicious but infinitely more subtle. The latest report is that King Tiran of Troius, Elaan's husband, has been poisoned by a rival royalist faction. Elaan is in hiding with her two children, boys aged two and four." Stocker paused to pick up a report and Kirk interrupted.

"What do I have to do with all this?"

"Elaan has sent word to the Federation asking that she be rescued and removed from the planet; and she wants you to be the one to do it." Stocker was carefully looking away from Kirk as he spoke. Everyone in Starfleet command had heard how Jim Kirk felt about secret missions.

"Me!" Kirk exclaimed. "How am I supposed to do that?"

"You'll have to beam down to the planet, in secret of course, locate Elaan, and arrange a beam-up. Of course, we can't let the Troians know we're involved or you'll find yourself in a fight, and we have no business being involved in this action. But those children of hers are the rightful heirs to the throne of Troius, and we need to see that they are kept safe."

"Marvelous," Kirk said with a bitter tone. "Just exactly my favorite activity when there is nothing going on. A little something to keep me from getting rusty."

Stocker rose and handed Kirk a packet of orders. "You're cleared to leave base whenever you're ready. Tell Mr. Spock he can talk to me when you get back, or beam down his papers if you can before you leave."

"He hasn't given them to me to sign yet," Jim said slowly. "Goodbye, Commodore." Irrationally, all he could think of on the way back to the ship was that he had never liked Stocker.

It took a journey of twelve days to reach the Troius system from Starbase Six. There was nothing in particular to do on the way, and Kirk was glad at first for the relatively quiet trip. Then he gradually became aware that Spock was avoiding him. They were in the rec room when Spock backed out of the third chess game since they left, and Jim was left sitting staring at his coffee. He barely noticed when Doctor McCoy plunked himself down next to him.

"When are you going to tell me what's eating you and Spock?" he asked.

Jim looked up startled. "What make's you think anything is eating me, much less Spock?" he countered.

"Aw, come on, Jim. Give me a little credit for knowing what I'm doing. You two have been walking around for a week acting like you lost your best friend."

"Guess you do know your job, after all," Kirk grinned faintly. "You've hit it."

"I've hit what?" McCoy asked, puzzled.

"Spock is leaving in six months, taking the directorship of the Vulcan Science Academy. I hadn't noticed it was bothering him, though. It was the logical thing to do." Jim took refuse in his coffee.

McCoy threw him an odd glance. "Did you tell him that?"

"Sure, what else could I say? I'm not going to be the captain of the Enterprise forever, and this job is tailor-made for him. The last Vulcan had the job for 27.4 years. He'd probably never get the chance again."

"27.4 years, huh?"

"Vulcan years." Jim grinned at McCoy's raised eyebrow.

McCoy sipped his own coffee slowly, then said, "I think you threw Spock a curve. He was expecting an emotional reaction from you, and you gave him a logical one. If I'm right, and I take no bets where a Vulcan is concerned, he's probably thinking you don't care if he leaves. He's having the Vulcan equivalent of a sulk."

"You're crazy," Jim told him mildly.

"Maybe so, but you ought to test it. See you later," McCoy said, rising and dropping his cup in the recycler.

"Sure," Jim answered thoughtfully. He rose and went back to his quarters to go over the reports on Elaan and Troius. At least with those he knew where he was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lieutenant Uhura sat in her customary place in the briefing room, looking around the table at the few people there. Spock sat in his seat by the computer terminal, still looking more distant than usual. Next to her own seat was Dr. McCoy, ready to play Devil's Advocate against whatever plan the captain presented. Uhura knew Kirk included McCoy in briefings where there was no need for a medical officer, just to hear his arguments. Between the two sat Jim Kirk, hands together and at ease, which was usual for him. And finally Chief Engineer Scott as next in command, who was there to hear his orders for the mission. It was a familiar group that had come over the years to think alike and knew how to act together without hesitation. Kirk called them together with a brief sweep of his eyes.

"You all know what we're here for, so this is just a final check to make sure everyone has his own orders clear. We'll be in the Troius system within the next eight hours, and I want to be sure we are in and out of there in record time. Scotty, we have to go in as close as we can at warp speed, drop to impulse power just long enough to beam down the landing party, and scram again. If Stocker's information is still correct, you can pick us up on a pass back i hours. No contact in the meantime. If that fails, you'll have to keep passing back through the system until you can retrieve us."

"The more times we pass through the system, the more likely we are to be detected," Scotty objected. "Can ye not do a little better than that?"

Kirk turned to Spock, who began obediently. "The report from the agents here on Troius indicates that Lady Elaan has fled to the hills, and we have a contact point in that area. This information is over a month old, however, and it is possible that the Lady has fled further or we may miss the contact entirely. In that case it is impossible to determine the time necessary to complete the mission."

"And if there is any trouble, there is nothing we can do to get you out of it. I don't like this much, Jim," came the Devil's Advocate. "Why does the Federation have to get involved in this anyway?"

"We brought Elaan here, we have to get her out. She is the legal regent and her children are the legal heirs. We're only taking her back to Elas safely. Then she can handle it from there. Elasian ships could never get into Troian space undetected. We can." Kirk paused, looked around. "I don't like it either but we're stuck. May I have something useful, please."

"Aren't you going to have a little trouble with your cover, over any length of time?" Uhura asked. "No one on this ship resembles either Elasians or Troians. And neither planet welcomes strangers outside the main spaceports."

Kirk looked at her thoughtfully. "The point is well-taken. There is also the language problem to be considered. You are now included in the landing party, Lieutenant. Arrange for the equipment and costume you'll need. If I remember correctly, there are some dark races of Troians you can be made up to resemble." He turned to his first officer.

"That is correct, Captain. With make-up and appropriate clothing, the lieutenant will make a much more convincing Troian than either you or I."

"We'll just have to stand around in the shadows and leave the work to Uhura." Kirk stood up. "Everybody got enough to go on? Scotty, determine exact arrival time and give us twenty minutes warning for the beamdown. I'll be in my quarters if

anyone needs me. Dismissed."

Exactly 7.32 hours later, according to Spock's rough estimate, the landing party found themselves in the mountains of Troius, just as the sky was darkening into twilight. Uhura looked around to take in as much of the landscape as she could before it grew too dark to see. Shivering, she drew the green gauze of her costume around her. I knew this wasn't going to be right, she thought in disgust. The quartermaster had drenched her in some sort of green rinse, and the dress had been designed to show this off in strategic places. Kirk had grinned when she asked if they were sure this was appropriate for her to wear, which hadn't reassured her significantly. Now she knew it was wrong, and she was going to freeze. Beside her Kirk and Spock were dressed in fairly nondescript shirts and pants with very elaborate capes. The hoods shadowed their faces, which didn't look Trojan despite the green make-up.

As she sighed Kirk turned swiftly around, the cape billowing out behind him with the wind. "All right, let's go. Where is that contact supposed to be?"

Spock gestured to the left. "There is supposed to be a hunting cabin in that direction." Uhura thought he looked lost without his tricorder to be more precise. "We should find a transmitter or a message of how to contact the underground group which is protecting Lady Elaan."

"I don't see a thing," Uhura objected.

"We have no choice, Uhura. Let's go." Kirk led the way down the path that Spock had indicated.

Walking in the dark, Uhura lost track of time. She was just beginning to wonder seriously if someone's information was incorrect, when the cabin came in view. "There's someone there," she whispered. A small wisp of smoke curled up from a chimney pot carved to resemble a dragon, though the windows were dark and shuttered.

"Our contact might be living there," Kirk answered. "Go ahead, you have the code identification to use."

"And if it is the wrong person," Spock put in, "we shall have to identify ourselves as lost travelers."

Uhura grinned. "If I lived in a spot like this, Mr. Spock, I would never believe in lost travelers. I've never read of one that was what he seemed."

Kirk interrupted. "All right, Uhura. Time to earn your keep."

While they had been talking, they had drawn close to the cabin. Now Uhura took a few steps away from the others and knocked on the door. She heard a brief scuffling then nothing. Puzzled she turned back to the captain. He gestured to her to try again.

This time the door opened slowly, a square of light against the gloom of the valley. A figure stood there, black and unseeable in the brightness behind him.

"Dark is no time for friends to be abroad," Uhura quoted in Trojan.

"It is the time when the dragons search and the Fibwebs bloom." The answer was barely a whisper.

"And one who is lost needs aid to return home."

With that the dark figure pulled the door wide open. "Come in, come in. What a relief that you are finally here!" The cape dropped back to reveal a green Trojan face, a young man who switched his language abruptly to Federation basic.

Kirk stepped forward. "Who are you?"

"Taner Birl is my name, a distant cousin of the king. Most of the royal party who were close to the king have been captured, but a few of us were able to escape and join Lady Elaan."

"That tallies with my information, Captain," Spock said.

"Good. I'm Captain James T. Kirk, this is Mr. Spock and Lieutenant Uhura. Where is Elaan?"

"We've had to move further into the mountains and leave some of our known hiding places," Birl said. He was moving swiftly around the room, packing a few small belongings in a sack. "This place isn't safe anymore, but I've been keeping

watch for you. We'll go now. There are sturdy 'abalus' for us to ride in the stable, that will take us further into the mountains. Follow me."

All though the night and into the next morning, they traveled slowly along hidden mountain paths. The going was slow along the narrow ways, trees and underbrush growing towards each other across the cleared spaces. Uhura found her fanciful Trojan costume even more unsuited to this type of travel. It was constantly being shredded by the tiny twigs and thorns that brushed against her legs. She was trying very hard at the same time not to think about the animals they found themselves riding. Something like a cross between a horse and a camel, the abalus were humpless with a narrow back and the camel's unusual gait which gave a rider a gentle, swaying ride. It wasn't too difficult for her to get used to them, Uhura found, thanking her experience in North Africa, visiting her father's cousins. Kirk wasn't doing too badly either, probably due to his knowledge of horses.

Unfortunately the whole thing was a disaster for Spock with his easily upset digestive system. Uhura watched as Kirk with an internal grin on his face mirrored Spock's progressive ill-health. The captain went from being mildly amused to active concern, for Spock's face turned yellower under the green make-up. To top it off for Uhura she had to ride at the end of the line watching the rest of the group, and the abalus were ugly enough to stop a clock. She grinned remembering Spock ask, "Why a clock, Captain?"

And Kirk's reply, "You ask the damdest questions."

Late in the afternoon they made one of their few necessary stops. Spock immediately turned to Birl asking, "How much longer do you anticipate?" It was almost a plea.

"Another hour at most, I should think," Birl answered.

"Good," Kirk put in. He had been speaking to Scotty on their most recent check-in with the Enterprise. "We'll be ready to go on the next check, four hours from now."

They were all reluctant now to get back on the beasts. Their narrow backs were beginning to resemble a torture chamber more than even an uncomfortable ride, and Uhura knew she was going to be sore for days. The discomfort kept her mind occupied, however, and it was sooner than she expected when she heard Spock say,

"There is someone on the path ahead, Captain." They stopped abruptly.

"It's all right," Birl said and raised a hand in greeting as he rode ahead of them to meet the two figures. He called, "It is I, Taner Birl. We are expected."

The sentries came out of the shadows and inspected the three aliens. "These are the Federation people who will aid our queen?" one of them asked.

"That's right."

"Go on then," said the second man gesturing with his weapon. "They are down there in the farmhouse."

Birl led the way down into a valley along an even narrower path that led off to the right of the first road. They wound slowly down the side of the mountain until they came out into a clear area. Before them was a stockaded shelter surrounded by farm buildings and corrals where more of the abalus were standing.

As they dismounted and looked around, someone led their beasts away. Uhura tried to pull the shreds of her gauze cape around her against the mountain breeze, and Spock just stood for a moment with his eyes closed. Trying to regain his land legs, Uhura thought. Kirk took a brief look around and headed for the main opening in the stockade. As he reached it a small figure came out, barely visible in the dark of the building behind.

"Is that you, Jim Kirk?"

"Yes, is that you, Elaan?" Kirk stepped up and took her hands in his, and their eyes met. After a moment Elaan smiled.

"We shall be all right now. It is wonderful that you came; I hardly dared hope that they would let you."

Kirk returned the smile, and he gestured to the others to follow Elaan into the building. "You requested my aid. They don't dare refuse you."

Spock and Uhura remained a respectful distance behind the two, but Uhura was

busy thinking. Elaan's changed, she thought. Partly physical, those two children have made her lose that almost boyish figure. But she's softer, less arrogant. I wonder if that's the children, too, or if it was her husband. Uhura turned to speak to Spock, relieved to notice his coloring was returning to normal.

"I'm hungry," she said. "Hope they have something for us to eat."

Spock looked as though he might lose the progress he had made to recovery. "It would be better just to rest for a while. The Enterprise will be returning in an hour or two. I seem to have neglected to make note of the exact time." He looked a little shocked with himself.

"We'll forgive you this time, Spock" Uhura said trying not to grin. "I don't think the captain is particular at the moment." They had found their way into the main house in the stockade where Kirk and Elaan sat at a rough table loaded with food.

"I thought you would be tired and hungry," Elaan explained. "Please be seated and take what pleases you."

"Is there any place where I can freshen up and get some different clothes," Uhura asked quickly. "I'm freezing in this thing the quartermaster supplied, and I'm filthy."

"I would also appreciate a chance for a few moments of quiet," Spock put in.

Uhura clapped her hands, and two women appeared from a door behind her. Uhura went off with one, while Spock followed the other. Kirk sat down with Elaan and was talking earnestly as they left.

Naturally the scream came at the worst possible moment. Uhura struggled to finish getting some clothes on and grab up her communicator, but it was some moments before she could burst out of the room into the main room where she had left the captain. Spock must have had a similar problem, for he came in only just after she did. There was no one in sight, but the screams in the courtyard were continuing, and they could hear the sound of weapons outside. Uhura pulled out her small hand phaser and headed for the outside door.

"Not that way, Lieutenant!" Spock said. "The captain would be protecting Lady Elaan and the children. We must try the other way."

Uhura turned and saw yet another door leading out of the main room, and they both pounded across to it. It was locked. Spock only hesitated a moment, then put his shoulder against it and shoved hard. The door fell in but there was no one in the room.

"This can't be right," Uhura said, and turned to go back the way they came.

"It must be. This is where the children were sleeping. There will have to be another way out of here." Spock ran his hands quickly along the back wall which faced toward the mountain. "Perhaps some sort of underground passage."

"I sure hope you're right, or we're going to get trapped here." Uhura started looking from the other end of the all. They met in the middle and stared at each other.

"The floor?" Uhura asked, but Spock was looking curiously at the bunk against the side wall.

"No, here it is." It took him only a moment to find the device for opening the trap door, and they found themselves staring into a dark opening that seemed to lead down into the mountain. "Fix the door so it doesn't look as though anyone has been in here," Spock commanded. "I'll get a light."

Uhura hurriedly set the broken door up and came back to follow Spock down into the passage. "Go on ahead with the light and see if there is anything there. I will pull this shut and latch it to prevent anyone using the same way."

She moved swiftly down the passage and came abruptly to a large opening that showed her a good sized cave. "This is it, Mr. Spock," she called. "It is some kind of a secret corral. Some of their steeds are stabled here, and it looks as though a couple of them are gone."

"We must follow and see if we can help. The captain will find it difficult to protect a woman and two small children alone."

Thinking of Kirk carrying a baby, Uhura thought, I should think so. It would

not do much for his dignity to get caught with an infant in his arms. "How long before Scotty gets back?" she asked.

"Approximately forty-seven minutes," Spock answered. They were hurriedly saddling two of the animals. "They could not be far ahead of us, even if two of these were saddled already. We should be able to catch up and find a place to hide until we are able to return to the Enterprise."

They mounted and rode slowly down the passage, not knowing where it would lead. After a few hundred meters they emerged into a larger cave which led into another, until finally they reached the opening in the side of the mountain. They looked around in the growing dark, unable to see tracks or evidence that anyone had preceded them from the cave.

"I suppose they did come this way," Uhura said doubtfully.

"It is the only logical interpretation. They were not in the courtyard," Spock returned, but she noted that he didn't seem all that sure of himself.

Suddenly, she saw some marks in the rocky ground. "Over here, Mr. Spock," she called. Spock dismounted and looked carefully around where she indicated.

"There is nothing else here. We are going to have to risk calling the captain by communicator."

Uhura objected. "That will just shout to high heaven that we are here if anyone is listening."

"We have no choice. We must not remain separated, and I have no intention of stumbling around blindly in the dark. We shall have to take the chance, and trust that Mr. Scott is on time with next rendezvous." Spock pulled his communicator out of a back pocket and flipped it open. "Spock to Kirk."

The answer came instantly. "Kirk here. Where are you, Spock? I've been waiting for your call for some time."

"Lieutenant Uhura and I were delayed in following you but have made our way out of the farmhouse undetected. There seems to be no pursuit. Are you nearby the entrance to the mountain hideaway?"

"Just to the left of the path there is a stream bed. Elaan brought us down that way. Follow the stream to the first dam, and we'll meet you there. Kirk out."

Kirk and Elaan made their way back to the stream dam to wait for the two officers to catch up with them. "What do you think happened?" he finally got a chance to ask her.

"You must have been spotted at the cabin yesterday evening. We hoped that by making such a roundabout and long trip they would betray themselves if anyone were following you. It doesn't seem to have worked." She looked down at the child sleeping before her on the saddle. "Thank the gods Birl suggested the hidden corral. He has probably defended it to the death; a very loyal cousin for my sons."

Kirk smiled a little sadly. "You have become very devious on Troius, Elaan. What happened to the direct little warrior maid I ferried here five years ago?"

"She grew up, Captain. These Troians have taught me much in the way of diplomacy and intrigue. They will live to regret it."

"Only if Scotty gets back to pick us up before anyone figures out where we've gone. Get back! I hear someone coming." He pulled his abalus back into the underbrush and pulled Elaan's along with him. They sat there still for a moment, then he saw Spock's head over the bank and rode out to greet his two officers.

"Glad to see you again, Spock, Uhura. Have any trouble?" he asked.

"We would have preferred some explicit directions, or an unlocked door to guide us in the proper direction," Spock said severely.

"Seemed like the best thing at the time," Kirk answered, thinking Spock was still being awfully formal with him. "Uhura, do you think Scotty is in communicator range yet?"

"I'll give it a try, Captain," Uhura answered, pulling out her communicator. For a few minutes she fiddled with the dials, changing frequencies and signals. Finally she gave it up. "Not close enough, Captain. We'd better find a place to settle down for a short while. It shouldn't be long."

"There is always the possibility that the Enterprise has been detected," Spock

put in quickly. "Her presence may have alerted the authorities to our landing on the planet."

"Or vice versa," Kirk added. "We'd better find a place to camp that is fairly undetectable and safe."

"My children are not used to being out in the open," Elaan said. As though to confirm her words the boy on Kirk's saddle woke and started looking for his mother, his small face frightened. "You'd better hand him to me or we are in for more noise than you'd like at the moment."

To Kirk's relief Uhura rode up then and took the child away from him with a big smile. He rode over to stand next to Spock and discuss what they were going to do next.

A few hours later found the small camp asleep in a tiny clearing, children tucked in between Elaan and Uhura, while Spock silently kept watch. Reluctantly he finally rose and shook his captain awake.

"What is it?" Kirk asked, sitting up and looking around.

"Your turn to take watch," Spock answered. "You've been asleep five hours, and I have tried to contact the Enterprise every fifteen minutes as you ordered. There is no response."

Kirk pulled out his own communicator and flipped it open. "Kirk to Enterprise." There was still nothing. "Let's hope Scotty was able to stay out of sight and is only waiting for a chance to get back into the system and pick us up. You'd better try to get some sleep now, Spock. No telling what is going to happen around here, and you should sleep while you can."

"Yes, sir." Spock laid down on the saddle blanket Kirk had just vacated and was immediately asleep. The captain did a brief walk around the camp to assure himself of what he was watching. When he came back Elaan was sitting alone in the center of the area.

"You should be asleep," Kirk said and sat beside her.

"I can't sleep after hearing what Mr. Spock said. Do you think they will ever be back to get us?"

"Of course they will. My crew doesn't give up very easily." Kirk smiled.

"If you get us off here I will owe you more than I can ever repay. I am already in your debt for what you taught me five years ago."

"You owe me nothing, Elaan," Kirk grinned. "You gave as good as you got."

"Ah, but I had never given anything before. You taught me that. When you left me here I was determined to be brave and strong, a credit to my people. But I never expected to have the kind of love I was starting to learn from you." Elaan looked away and her voice became low. "Then I met Tiran. Just as you were different than any other man I had known, so was my husband. He was a strong and just ruler, but good and kind as well. They never understood him here, and in the end they killed him." Her voice became very bitter. "They'll pay for that, and my son will have his throne back if I die for it!" She stood up, eyes flashing in the sleep, and Kirk reached out a hand to touch her arm.

"Would Tiran approve of that?" he asked gently.

Elaan sat down again and stared at him. "What else can I do?"

"I would think of something besides attacking Troius with everything Elas can send forth. From what you said, I think Tiran would have also. If you think, I believe you will find the way to regain your son's heritage in which no one will die." Jim took Elaan's hand in his. "The warrior maid is gone, you said so yourself. Don't bring her back."

"I will try."

A sudden sound made Kirk's head snap around. "What was that?" He jumped up and looked around in the direction of the sound. "Spock, Uhura, on your feet. There's someone out there."

Spock was instantly alert and at his side, as though he had never been asleep. "I can hear abalus and riders coming up the way we came along the stream. They must have finally located our exit from the farmhouse and traced us this way."

"Let's get out of here then. If we stay on the move long enough maybe we can

stay free until Scotty gets back."

Uhura and Elaan were already getting their abalus saddled, tying the children firmly in their riding baskets. Kirk came up to Elaan while Spock did the other two steeds. "Is there a particular direction we should head in?" he asked. "We are going to have to elude them as long as possible, or at least until we are sure what's happened to the Enterprise."

"Up into the mountains again," Elaan said quickly. "There are other outposts of the ousted party back in there, and we could make a stand with them if we have too. If only my boys weren't here and I could fight."

Kirk smiled at her flashing eyes and earnest face. "If the boys weren't with us we wouldn't even be here." But he was worrying about the same thing. Having small children with him meant giving in when he was still full of fight, and he didn't like that.

"Ready, Captain," came Spock's voice as he mounted his own beast. Hurriedly Kirk got into his saddle and headed the beast away from the crashing sounds in the stream bed and up into the mountains.

After a half-hour of rough riding they came out onto a path hanging precariously on the steep side of the valley. Kirk could see it switch back and forth until it went out of sight on the far side of the valley. "Do you know where we are?" he asked Elaan.

"I think so," she answered. "This is the valley of the Ocher River, the source of the great Green River that divides the country from east to west." She considered thoughtfully. "If we head up into the valley we could better escape into neutral territory and find our allies."

"I remember the maps, Captain," Spock put in. "If we get back into those twisted valleys and hills, we should be able to elude capture for as long as necessary."

Not with children, Kirk thought, but he said, "Fine. Let's go."

Kirk led the way up the mountain path, Spock bringing up the rear. For a long time there was no sound but their own animals' hooves on the rocky ground, and he began to think they had eluded their pursuers for the time being. He signaled for a halt and tried his communicator again. Still nothing. He sat lost in thought, one knuckle against his lower lip. This assignment was deteriorating rapidly, and he didn't see anyway it was going to turn out satisfactorily.

"Captain, there are sounds along the path behind us. I believe they have located our emergence from the forest and are following us." Spock kicked his beast up to stand beside his captain.

"I can see torches on the hill below us," Uhura confirmed. "They are heading both up and down, taking no chances I guess."

Kirk looked around in the gray dawn, his eyes on the rocky mountain that was now rising on their left. Struck by an idea he looked ahead to the end of the valley.

"Is that a fairly narrow pass up there, with sheer cliff on either side?" he asked Spock, whose eyesight was better than his.

The first officer shaded his eyes and stared. "It would seem so, about fifteen minutes hard ride from here I would judge."

Elaan agreed. "If it is the pass I think it is, it is quite sheer. It took days for them to cut the road in to the mountain, and there are often slides in the area."

"Ahhh, just what the captain ordered," Kirk grinned. "Let's go."

The abalus were nearly collapsed by the time the riders had all passed through the narrow pass. "It doesn't matter," Kirk said. "If this doesn't work don't see how we can escape them anyhow. Mister Spock, your phaser. Do you think we can make an avalanche cut off the road?"

Spock was studying the cliffside with skepticism. "We can try, Captain, but I am not sanguine that we can control it."

"Elaan, Uhura, get back with those kids and get ready to ride if you have to. Uhura, still have your communicator?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then, here goes." Kirk lifted his phaser and sighted toward the cut made to level the road. Spock waited to see where the captain's beam hit, then aimed slightly higher and to the left of where it struck. "Is anything happening?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, Captain, I think so." Spock was watching the cliffside intently. Small rocks and boulders were starting to bound down. Suddenly a wide cleft opened between their two points of phaser fire, and an acre of mountain began to move.

"Jim!" Spock cried and dove across his beast towards his captain.

Kirk had seen as well that the mountain directly beside them had also started to shift. He rose and bent into a roll as Spock's momentum hit him and carried the two over the backs of their mounts, down into the darkness below the path. He had only time to wonder how deep they would drop when he hit his head on a rock and knew nothing else.

Jim came to later at the touch of Spock's gentle fingers probing the side of his head. "Ow, that hurts!" he cried.

"Slight concussion, I believe, Captain," Spock said as he looked. "It would be best for you to lie quietly for the moment. We are safe on some sort of wide ledge."

"Nonsense, we have to get to Elaan and Uhura." He started to rise and was instantly wretchedly sick. Spock held him firmly on the shoulders and eased him back into a lying position.

"Now will you listen to me?" he asked mildly.

"Certainly, Doctor McCoy," Kirk grinned feebly. Then he became aware that Uhura was calling down the mountain side.

"I've got that rope hitched to the saddle, Mister Spock. Do you need me to come down and give you a hand?"

"No, Lieutenant. The captain is conscious." For some time there was a rustling of ropes as Spock methodically knotted and tested what Uhura had done. Then he turned back to Kirk. "Put this around you, like so. The abalus will pull you back up to the path."

Kirk lifted his head and almost passed out. "I'll try," he said grimly.

"I'll be right behind you, Captain. Concentrate only on keeping out of the vegetation."

With Spock's arm behind him, and Uhura pulling as he reached the top, Kirk soon found himself once again on the path. "I guess it worked," he said uncertainly.

"We are safe for the moment," Spock said. "They will undoubtedly make arrangements to get around the slide as quickly as possible. We should leave the vicinity as soon as you feel up to it, Captain."

At that moment the communicator clicked. Kirk stared at it in disbelief, then had it out and opened it eagerly.

"Scotty, that you? Where have you been?"

"Sorry, Captain. There were some of the Trojan system ships out on maneuvers for a few hours here. We had to go into orbit around planet six and wait until the sky was clear. Are you all right?"

"We're fine now. Beam us up. Oh, better have Doctor McCoy standing by."

"He's down there now," Scotty chuckled.

The beam-up began, and that was the last thing Kirk remembered until he awoke in sickbay to see McCoy hovering anxiously over him.

"What happened to me?" he asked in surprise.

"Don't you know you're not supposed to beam-up with a head injury?" McCoy snapped. "I'll bet you feel awful."

"Now that you mention it, I do," Kirk said feeling his head gingerly. "Spock have everything under control?"

"Sure does. We're halfway to Elas already, and Elaan is showing the boys the ship. No one seems to have spotted us, and Spock thinks they may decide you all died under the slide." McCoy was checking the medical panel over the bed. "I've got to do a little more work on that concussion. Naptime for you."

Kirk held up his hand. "Not until I see Spock."

McCoy sighed. "I thought you'd say that." He raised his voice. "Come on in, Spock, and don't stay too long."

The first officer came in and stood at the foot of the bed, hands behind him and back straight. "It is unfortunate that the injury is not too severe, Captain. The Elasians will certainly wish you to accompany the Lady Elaan to her home."

"Yes, Spock," Kirk said with an impatient gesture. Then, "What am I going to do when you are gone? There won't be anyone here to rescue me from the consequences of my own actions."

The straight back relaxed and the hands came into view. "I admit it has given me some concern as well. I have no solution."

"Spock, why can't you let it go one more time? When I'm commodore, I want you as captain of my flagship, you know." He grinned, and Spock raised an amused eyebrow. "Well, as you said I'm not going to be captain forever."

"I have to go back to Vulcan, Captain," Spock said after a long pause. "It is something I have been starting to accept for a year or so. You see, the only place I have found it possible to live as a Vulcan is with non-Vulcans. I am not readily accepted by my father's people, although I think of myself primarily as a Vulcan."

Kirk nodded. That had been apparent to him for a long time.

"Being here on the Enterprise, after so many years, has become a refuge to me. I am accepted here on my own terms, and it was strengthened me. Now I have the chance to return to Vulcan in my own field. It is something I can not refuse."

"What if you decide you cannot do it?" Kirk asked softly.

Spock's thin face lightened perceptibly. "The probability is 97.16% that I can do it, Jim. Under your command I have learned much of myself, of what it means to be Vulcan, and Human." He paused and looked away. "Of course, you do not have to sign my transfer papers."

Jim gave Spock a lopsided smile that threatened to turn into something else. "You know I do, Spock. How could I keep you here now that I know what it means to you to go? We'd both end up hating each other if I made you stay."

"I trust your judgment on emotional reactions, Captain. I will bring you the orders to sign this evening."

They were interrupted now by Uhura's voice. "Mister Spock, we are approaching Elas; message coming in from Lady Elaan's family."

"I must go now, Captain. I will make arrangements for you to visit Elas when you have recovered." Spock disappeared out the door, and McCoy came back in to finish work on the captain's injury.

Jim Kirk, however, did not get a chance to visit Elas again. When he awoke late that evening, Spock came in with a message from Starbase Six. "We have been ordered to return to the base immediately rather than continue on to our next assignment."

"Wonder what that means?" Kirk said, and forgot it. His mind was on the attack he was planning for the next chess game he could get Spock into.

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The meeting with Commodore Stocker was a shock. Kirk and Spock looked at each other in disbelief. "Will you repeat that, Commodore?" Kirk asked gruffly.

Stocker looked at them impatiently. "I said, Spock will have to return to Vulcan at once. The retiring director has required unexpected surgery and will have to be in the hospital for some months. We have a class II ship waiting to take Spock to Vulcan as soon as he can leave."

"Commodore, I can't be expected to give up my first officer on this kind of notice, much less my science officer," Kirk objected. "It is in our orders to go to Vulcan in six months—"

"Five months and four days," Spock interrupted.

Jim stared at him. "Whatever. I still have numerous missions ahead and require a full ship's complement. In addition, my crew were looking forward to the installation ceremony on Vulcan and shore leave there. I don't mind telling you I do not want to change my—"

This time Stocker interrupted. "You don't have a choice. Here are the files on your new first officer and science officer. You can pick them up as you patrol. They're waiting. Now that will be all, Captain and Mister Spock. I have work to do." He sat down and began to read a report.

Kirk and Spock walked slowly out into the hall. "That man's a chairbound paperpusher, Jim," Spock said suddenly.

Kirk started to laugh. "That has to be the most vindictive thing I've ever heard you say. Come on. We'd better get you back to the ship and get you packed." He started towards the transporter quickly. Keep busy and don't think, he told himself. You can let it bother you later.

When Jim came off duty later, he stopped in his cabin and immediately left again to find Spock. As he came down the corridor he saw the door to the first officer's cabin was open, three neatly packed transport containers lined up outside. He looked in, dismayed. "Oh, Spock," he said softly. The room was bare, the wall coverings gone. The demon figure with the firepot that had squatted on the shelf beside the bed no longer stood there. It looked just like anyone else's cabin now.

Spock turned from where he was packing the final container. "Is there anything I can do for you, Captain?"

Jim shook his head and walked into the cabin, looking around with a forlorn sort of feeling. "I guess I'm just going to have to get used to knowing that you are really going. When I thought you had six months before leaving, it was easy to pretend it might never happen." He sat down on the bunk and put his head on his hand. "I wish I had a little of your ability not to let things like this affect me."

Spock turned and looked at him, dark eyes hidden and unreadable. "I do not let this affect me because it changes nothing between us," he said.

"Not change anything! How can it help it? You are going to be thousands of light years from the Enterprise."

"It makes no difference in anything else."

"Be logical, Spock," Kirk said bitterly. "I know, this has happened to me before. Everyone that has ever been close to me is gone. People's lives change, and they are different the next time you see them. I've lost everyone I've ever loved." Kirk stood up and walked across the room, not seeing Spock had started to join him. "If you were only going to be at Starfleet Academy, it wouldn't be so hard; but you are going to Vulcan. Will you even be the same person next time I see you?"

"I won't change, Jim. The friendship you have given me is something I refuse to permit to disappear." Kirk was startled, but he did not look at Spock, afraid to break the thread of what Spock was starting to say. "Where ever I am, whatever I do will ways be affected by your influence on me." Spock paused, then went on in a different tone of voice. "On Vulcan strong personal relationships outside the family are not encouraged. But every young person belongs to what your anthropologists call an age-mate grouping. It happens at times that these age-mates can become as close as brothers, and in that event there is a custom we call tan-ryn. The two people literally become part of each other's families, with rights in that clan and a place in the family home. For your tan-ryn family you are never a guest, no matter how rarely occasion brings you there. In my home, wherever it may be, there will always be tan-ryn for you."

Jim turned to Spock, and their eyes met. "Thank you, Spock. You make me believe it could really be so this time."

The Vulcan turned back to his pile of possessions and lifted up a small parcel. "I would like you to have this," he said as he held it to Kirk.

"Thank you again," Jim said, and he hesitated.

"Please open it now."

It revealed itself to be a small painting, done in Vulcan style, with Vulcan materials, the subject a landscape that could only be on Vulcan. "What is it?" Jim asked, "I've seen it on your wall."

"It is a likeness of our ancestral home place in the mountains. My father painted it for me after the Babel Conference, while he was there recuperating." Spock looked at Kirk a little shyly. "It is my piece of Tan-rym wherever you are."

Jim simply could not speak for a moment. A gift from Spock's father was such a personal thing for Spock to give him, it showed him more than he had realized how close Spock considered them to be. He crossed suddenly over to the bunk where he had left the package he meant to give Spock. "This is for you. I've wrapped it well for your trip."

Spock set it down on the desk and lifted the lid. Very gently he lifted out one of the chessmen the Enterprise crew had given Kirk after the Tholian Web incident. "You can't give me this set!" he said in obvious shock.

"I couldn't play on it again with anyone else. Keep it for me when I visit you." Kirk took the beautifully carved little piece from Spock and nestled it down again in the packing. "Take good care of it, Spock."

For a long moment neither man spoke. Then Spock picked up the small box of chessmen and carried it over to the container. "Captain, I must finish packing," he said quietly.

Jim smiled behind Spock's back. "I understand. I'll see you later, then." He left quickly, carrying the small painting to put in his own cabin before dinner.

Even on such short notice, Uhura and Christine Chapel had insisted on giving a farewell dinner. When Kirk arrived in the officer's dining room, he thought it looked as though they had been planning this for weeks. From somewhere, probably the base below, they had managed to find fresh flowers and some table decorations that looked vaguely Vulcan, if you weren't too particular. About thirty of the most senior officers were there in their satin formal wear. Kirk looked at them a little morbidly, wondering how many of them he'd get to keep until he was promoted, and why it had to be Spock who was first. Then he put on his very best Captain's smile and did his rounds. He was not going to allow this to turn into an embarrassingly sentimental farewell that Spock would hate.

By the time dinner was over, he felt that it had gone very well. His crew seemed to have learned over the years enough of Spock to make certain how to treat him in this final time together. Gradually, one by one, the guests said their goodbyes and left. When only a few remained, Kirk decided to remind Spock that they had better get to the transporter room. Then he saw Christine Chapel standing alone at the table, her eyes red with tears. Spock went over and spoke to her, and Kirk turned away.

"Want to come with me to get another drink?" McCoy asked beside him. "Let's leave them to whatever he can say to her. Have you noticed? He's managed to say something to nearly everyone here."

"No drink, Bones," Kirk said, turning to look at the doctor. "I wish Spock didn't have to be leaving, though, to find the words to talk to his friends."

"I don't think he'd agree with you," McCoy smiled. "I think I'll say my goodbye now and not go down to the transporter with you." They were both silent for a moment, then they saw Christine turn and leave quickly. McCoy headed across the room. "Spock, wait a moment," Kirk heard him say.

Jim downed the last of the drink he'd been nursing and walked out of the nearly deserted room. Finding a wall-com in the corridor, he called down to the transporter room. "Everything ready down there, Scotty?" he asked.

"Aye, Captain. Are ye on the way?"

"We'll be down in a minute. Keep her warmed up." Kirk punched the button and waited patiently for Spock to join him.

It was some minutes before Spock came out, and Kirk had time to wonder what he and McCoy could be saying to each other. Theirs was an odd friendship, but none the less close for all of that. Spock had a curiously strained look about him as he joined the captain.

"Well, Mister Spock, Scotty tells me he's all set. Shall we go?"

"In a moment, Captain. First I would like to say thank you for all I have learned in these years on the Enterprise."

"It is enough to know that you wish to thank me, Spock. The person you were when we first met would not have found it necessary," Kirk said softly.

"Nevertheless, Jim, I do say it. The lessons you have taught me about command, strength, and caring for others, are some of the most valuable of the experiences I will take with me." He reached up and undid the clasp of the IDIC pendant he had been wearing in honor of the occasion. "Will you take this as a symbol of my thanks?"

"I need no symbol," Jim answered; but he held out his hand, and Spock dropped the medallion and chain into it. Kirk looked at it for a moment, then lifted his eyes to meet Spock's. "But I'll wear it in remembrance of all the things that you have taught me."

Abruptly he turned and headed down the corridor, wondering why this of all times he was running from an emotion that Spock was not. Spock followed silently until they reached the transporter room, but before they could go in he put a hand on Jim's arm and stopped him outside. "Live long and prosper, my friend," he said as he held his hand up in Vulcan salute.

Jim returned the salute, then held out his hand to Spock. The Vulcan looked at it quizzically for a moment, then slowly reached to return the clasp. "Goodbye, Spock, I'll miss you," Jim said. They stood that way for a moment, hands clasped and eyes locked before Jim took a deep breath and plunged into the transporter room.

Wordlessly Spock stepped up on the platform as Kirk moved over next to Scotty at the console. "Energize," Kirk said as he raised his hand once again. Spock returned the salute as he changed into a pillar of color and disappeared. For a long time Kirk stared at the empty platform, then he heard the door slide open behind him.

"Captain?" It was Uhura.

Kirk turned to her with a slightly wobbly smile. "Well, that's that. I never thought I'd see it, but here I am, alone."

"Not alone," she said as she came up beside him. "There's still a lot of us around in case you didn't notice. And the Enterprise." Uhura slipped her arm under his. "Let's go get a drink."

Kirk grinned down at her and found that it helped. "You're right. I do have you all, at least for a while." He turned his back resolutely on the empty platform. "I'll take you up on that drink; let's go." Below them Starbase six receded, and the Enterprise left Spock behind as she headed on her new trek in space.





"Well, Lori, what do you think of Captain Kirk?" Admiral Heihachiro Nogura gestured to Lori Ciani as he spoke, and she hurriedly accepted the seat before his desk.

"I am very impressed, sir. Up until now I had assumed no man can do even a part of everything - that there's no such thing as 'renaissance man.' But Jim Kirk must be the closest thing I've ever come to one. His command of the Enterprise has been nothing short of phenomenal."

"And personally?" Nogura inquired. He was not looking at her, but Lori was sure he knew he was putting her on the spot. In fact, she'd been entertaining the most intricate fantasy about Kirk when Nogura had called her into his office.

"Equally impressive," she decided to say and evade the question. She knew Nogura wanted her feelings. "His officers seem completely loyal to him as a man. I'd like to know what has made him and the Vulcan such good friends."

Nogura turned a stylus in his hands thoughtfully. "Lori, we need Kirk here at Headquarters. A 'hero' such as he is, with his skills, can be just the advantage Starfleet needs in order to retain our prestige—prestige we are in danger of losing."

His meaning was clear; Lori was his representative to the New Humans and saw everyday how the image of Starfleet among such groups had diminished. Yet she had to protest. "Kirk isn't going to want a staff job, sir. He seems very much at home on his starship, out in deep space."

"The Promotion Board feels otherwise. They have decided to promote him to Admiral and put him to work here." Nogura put up a hand to forestall her protest. "I'm giving you the job of getting him to accept that decision."

She was momentarily speechless. "I don't see how I can do that," she told him finally.

"You are my special emissary to the New Humans, Protocol Officer, and a trained diplomat, in addition to being xeno-psychologist for Non-human relations. Handling a man like Kirk ought to be simple."

"I can do it, sir," Lori replied stiffly, even while knowing he had manipulated her into accepting the responsibility. She left the office moments later, resolved against her better judgment to do the job successfully.

Fortunately, Jim Kirk seemed determined to make her job, if not simple, at least pleasant. Lori looked up from her desk late that afternoon to see him in her doorway.

"Good afternoon, Admiral," he said with a smile. "Mind if I bother you for a

few minutes?"

"Not at all," she smiled back. Come into my parlor... "What can I do for you?" She gestured to her visitor's chair, and he took the seat easily.

"I've been reading over your recommendations for the supplementary training program for Contact Teams, and I was wondering about a few things. Do you really believe every starship officer needs to participate in this training?"

"Certainly."

"It's going to take a lot of time and effort away from an already heavy schedule of scientific duties and current ship training. I'm not sure we can afford this much additional time." He was frowning slightly. "Have you ever served on a starship, Admiral?"

"My experience is limited," Lori admitted. "The problem is, however, that as the Federation grows, we are constantly in touch with new races. We cannot permit the possible consequences of the ignorant actions of even one person."

"I'm aware of that," he replied swiftly. "I've seen enough of that kind of problem. But have you considered there might be better ways to go about handling it?"

"I've thought of several. What do you suggest?" She was intrigued by what he might have in mind. Did the famous Kirk skill extend even into xero-psychology? Apparently it did. He had several pertinent suggestions to make about her proposal and a different outlook on the matter than anyone else had previously expressed. Within a short time she was asking him questions, and Lori began to wonder if she would have to scrap her entire program.

It was over half an hour before Kirk finally left. He suddenly rose saying, "I'm sorry. I didn't intend to take so much of your time." He gave her a smile of apology which somehow made Lori feel she'd been the one at fault. "However, this was so important to starships, I felt I had to let you know as long as I had the chance."

"I understand," she said as she rose after him. "Your point of view is extremely helpful. I wish I had someone here on the staff to work with when I develop such programs." Might as well drop the seed of the idea now.

Kirk was surprised. "Don't you?"

"Not really. It's hard to get deep space veterans to take staff jobs—they like to be in space."

"I understand that." He smiled again, and she was once more warmed by the sincerity of that smile. "Yet if these things were worked out before we have to deal with them, it would make our job a lot smoother."

"We keep trying, Captain. Your advise will help a great deal. If you think of anything else, be sure to let me know." She was not going to dislodge that small seed by pressing now. Obviously Nogura had not yet told Kirk of the coming promotion.

"Good-bye, Admiral. Thank you again for the time." Kirk made his way out through the outer office, and Lori stood watching him from her doorway.

Very impressive, she thought again to herself, then blushed. It was more his physical presence she was thinking of as she watched his back retreat than his command presence.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning Lori found a private memo on her desk to the effect that Nogura was going to inform Kirk of his promotion at the briefing that morning. She knew what that meant: she was to take charge of Kirk immediately. Only let Kirk get back to his ship without some sort of push and Nogura might lose him. He'd have no incentive to accept the rapid promotion and a lot of incentive to stay right where he was.

Resenting the deviousness of the necessity to do this, Lori sat down to make her plans. She had to let Kirk see the needs at Headquarters and to show him that he was the one man for the job. What would be best? To show Kirk the areas that really needed his help first, or to show him the ones that were succeeding? She rubbed her chin and thought. Finally she decided to shock him first with the dismal

areas that really needed sound advice. With the sight of those errors and obvious mistakes preying on his mind, the impact of the successes would then be stronger. Now, which departments would make the best demonstrations? Lori started to scribble out notes, as if this were a report to the Commanding Admiral. It was less personal this way, and she could pretend that Kirk was not a fascinating person for whom this could very possibly be the worst thing to do.

It was nearly 1100 hours before she got a call from Nogura's yeoman. "Admiral Ciani, I was told to let you know that the meeting between Captain Kirk and the admiral is about to end."

"Thank you, yeoman." Lori sat for a moment, then picked up some old reports from her desk. Now to meet Kirk accidentally and put her plan into motion.

Kirk came walking out of Nogura's conference room just as Lori reached the main office. His eyes were distant, and he did not see her standing in the doorway. Lori had to put herself right in his path to get his notice.

"Excuse me, Lori," he said quickly. "I didn't see you."

She smiled warmly, noting his use of her name instead of her title. He must be truly distracted to forget that courtesy. "Congratulations, Jim. Looks like you've heard the good news."

Kirk's face took on a lopsided grin. "I haven't quite taken it all in yet, Lori. I'm going to have to let this sink in slowly."

Lori laid down the reports, trying not to meet his eye. She picked up another file as camouflage, and said slowly, "I've an idea. Let me show you around a bit. Then we can have some lunch, and you can ask me anything you like." That's it: assume he's going to take the job, and pretty soon he'll assume it, too. "It's quite interesting to see what we do around here. The decisions we make are crucial, no matter what starship captains seem to think on occasion."

"That sounds perfect. You're sure you've got the time?"

"That's no problem. My schedule is pretty open for the next day or so" Lori led the way out of the office, talking all the while. The Fleet Deployment office was just down the hall, and she had decided to start there. It was neither a success or a failure, but it was where Jim Kirk was most likely to be assigned. It would give him something to be thinking of, a sort of new home that would be comforting when seeing everything else—a place to relate to.

Kirk was an intelligent man, and Lori did not want to make the mistake of pointing things out to him too obviously. If he ever realized how carefully she planned their tour, all her good intentions would go for nothing. Even so, she was startled at how quickly he picked up on the vast differences between the first part of the tour and the later sections. When they finally reached the Officer's Club for a very late lunch, she could see his mind was already worrying over the problem.

"Was that the usual situation in the Security Section?" he demanded as they took their seats. They had stumbled into the middle of some sort of confusion about training cadets. Lori hadn't quite followed what it was all about, but Kirk obviously had.

"I don't get down there much, but I think that Commodore Minck is not considered an overly efficient officer," she said carefully, looking over the menu.

"Efficient! The man's a..." Kirk stopped, obviously not wanting to libel the man in front of her. "Has he ever served on a starship?" The question was one which had come up repeatedly. At first Lori had found it necessary to insert it into the conversation. Now Kirk asked it each time he met a new commander.

"Only on a class II cruiser. I'm afraid we don't have much tenure for Security personnel." For some reason she didn't know about, most of them were very young.

"I'm not surprised," he said bitterly. "We lose enough of them from their own stupidity...or lack of training." It was a possibility he seemed to be considering for the first time.

Lori took advantage of the break to make her order, and Kirk quickly chose his lunch. For a time they were silent as they nursed their drinks; then Kirk continued. "I see Charlie Svoboda has been put in charge of the Weapons Board. I

was glad to see he's still in Starfleet. That radiation accident on the Potemkin was pretty bad."

Lori nodded. "He was in therapy for over a year, but he took over the Board while still in the hospital. He said it was good for him, and he was damned if that sort of thing would ever happen again."

Kirk nodded thoughtfully, and Lori took a bite of her quiche, thinking it was time to change the subject.

"Jim, you know xeno-psychology is my specialty. I'm interested in knowing a little about how you have found working with a Vulcan as your second in command." This was a little dangerous, getting him to think about his ship. But if he respected Spock as much as it seemed, she might get him thinking about Spock as captain.

Kirk's eyes lit up. He finished sipping his drink and said enthusiastically, "It's been the best thing that happened to me as captain. Without his aid, I doubt we'd all be back here now.

"No problems with his differences in background?"

"I didn't say that, exactly," Kirk grinned. "I'll admit it took me awhile to get used to having him around. I wasn't in favor of having a Vulcan as one of my senior officers, even if he was a spectacular Science Officer. I didn't think he could handle the responsibility, or that I could depend on him like I could a human. I was wrong."

"I was impressed by his attention to detail at the debriefing the other day. But didn't your crew find that Vulcan precision can be too close to nit-picking occasionally?"

Kirk laughed again. "Sure, so do I. When it gets to the irritating point, I tell him. He usually backs off, saying he was just trying to see I had complete information. We've all adjusted to it, just as we've learned to adjust to everyone else's little idiosyncrasies."

Carefully not looking at him, Lori cut a bite and said, "Would you recommend him as a captain? He's never been recommended, even though he's been in the service longer than you."

"I think he'd make a terrific captain."

"There are no primarily Vulcan ships without captains at the moment."

"I was unaware that we assigned ships on the basis of race," Kirk said stiffly. "Spock can handle any ship."

"That's good to know. Despite my xeno-psych specialty, I have never worked with Vulcans. At times I must depend on what I learn from others. I feel your first-hand information will be reliable."

Kirk turned his glass thoughtfully in his hands for a moment, then asked, "Is it true you're Nogura's special emissary to the New Humans?" Lori nodded, intrigued that he knew this much about her. "Tell me about that. We get very little information about these new influences back here on Earth. The effects seem more obvious—and troublesome—up close than when reading reports on my ship."

Lori agreed. It was time to change the subject entirely. No more thinking about deep space or Headquarters. Let him see the challenges that the New Human movement represented right here on Earth. This planet was his true home after all; no man could live in space forever. They spent the rest of the afternoon talking over her job, then going from that to politics, and finally to everything either one could think of. Lori salved her conscience about her long stay away from the office by reminding herself Nogura had ordered her to make Kirk accept his promotion. She was beginning to wish personally that he would choose to stay; he was the most intriguing man she had ever met.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning Nogura called her back to his office. "I think you should know, Lori, that whatever you said to Captain Kirk was exactly right. He's let me know that he will definitely accept the promotion."

Delight and regret warred briefly, but the regret lost out. "I'm pleased to hear that, Admiral. Has he said anything about his recommendation for his

replacement?"

"He'll bring me the reports later. I've given him the codes he needs to review personnel files."

"You might like to know that I think he will recommend Commander Spock."

Nogura gave her a sharp, indefinable look. "Why do you think that?"

"I told you I was intrigued by their friendship, so I asked him a little about it yesterday. Kirk was very enthusiastic in recommending Spock and in saying everyone on the ship accepts Spock's command readily. That could be an immense advantage in reconciling Jim...Admiral Kirk to his new position."

Nogura eyed her carefully, noting her slip in using Jim's name. No, well, she reasoned, he must have known it would happen.

"That is very useful, Lori. Thank you." They spoke briefly for another moment, then Lori returned to her work. Contrary to what she had told Kirk the day before, her schedule was not very open, and she had a conference in Washington to attend the next day. She was not prepared for it.

The Washington conference somehow extended into two days, which were then interrupted by an emergency call to Singapore, following by another to Tehran. Consequently it was over a week before Lori was back to San Francisco. During that time she'd put Jim Kirk to the back of her mind, and the only thing she really wondered about was if he would take his leave before she returned.

Arriving early at her office the day of her return, Lori was appalled by the amount of correspondence she would have to look over. There was also a small pile of private memos from Nogura. She sighed and plunged into those, only to find herself dismayed. Spock had quit the service in protest against Kirk's promotion and his own promotion to captain of the Enterprise. One of the notes on the subject indicated that several officers, including Kirk's Chief Medical Officer, also objected. The general opinion seemed to be that Kirk's profile showed him to be suited primarily for command and deep space, and that promoting him at this point was both unfair to him and a loss to space commands.

At the bottom of the pile was a short note from Nogura, written in general but non-ambiguous terms. "Lori, these notes are for your personal use. It is still important that James Kirk become a useful member of my staff, and I'm giving you the continuing responsibility of giving him the guidance and help necessary to make the transition. Do what you need to in order to keep him on the team."

Lori bit her lip in chagrin. It had never occurred to her that Nogura would promote Kirk against so much expert advice. Why hadn't the Promotion Board stopped this? The answer struck her almost immediately: because Nogura had selected and assigned most of them. They were sure to follow his recommendations, particularly in light of Kirk's obvious public relations value. With a sigh, Lori looked back to the note. Kirk was still her responsibility, despite her absence for several days. What was he thinking now? If she would not keep him happy at Starfleet, was Nogura going to blame her?

Immediately Lori's hand went to her desk-com. "Yeoman, can you tell me if Admiral Kirk is in the building?"

"Just a moment." There was a pause as the yeoman checked up on the daily report. "Yes, ma'am. He's scheduled to be in his office all day."

"Thank you." Lori turned back to the reports and read them over again less quickly. She wanted to know the exact situation before she went to see Jim.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim Kirk sat at his desk, reviewing a large stack of reports and briefings. It was proving harder than he had anticipated to settle into the routine of his office. Too many things were new to him. On the ship, he thought, I always knew exactly what I wanted and when I wanted it. But then, I've served on ships almost from the day I graduated from the Academy. All I need is some experience and practice. He paused in his thinking and was honest with himself, ...And maybe a good deputy. I never appreciated before how much help it was to have Spock weed through things before I made decisions.

The thought of Spock made him pause in his reading. Kirk was no longer as

angry as he had been when Spock refused to take the captaincy of the Enterprise, but he was just as puzzled and hurt. He knew how much it meant to me. Why couldn't Spock do that for me? And what did I do wrong that made him leave Earth forever? Kirk shook his head and tried to force his attention back to his work. He'd been all over this a hundred times since Spock had abruptly resigned Starfleet a week earlier, and he was no nearer understanding than he'd been then.

The sliding of his office door opening attracted his attention, and Kirk looked up questioningly. "Hi," Lori Ciani said, peeking around the corner. "How're things working out?"

Kirk was delighted to see her and gave her a warm smile. "I think I'm getting the idea of this," he said, rising and coming around the desk. "But there's an awful lot of paperwork. I've never been much in favor of that."

Lori came all the way into the room, her fawnlike grace as she walked making his heart begin to pound quickly. She smiled back as she began to apologize. "Sorry I had to run out like that last week. There were a couple of emergency calls, and the Admiral wants every New Human problem met instantly." Her eyes were moving around the room in curiosity, and she gently touched the carved box on his desk as she spoke. The angular grace in her gesture was more attractive than he remembered from their brief acquaintance before she left.

"I had plenty to keep me busy. My predecessor was a pretty thorough report maker. Now that you're back, though, I'm sure I can find a moment or two I can work free." He smiled, suddenly quite sure he wanted to see more of Lori. "Can I take you out for dinner tonight?"

"I'd love that, but..." she gave him an odd glance before saying, "...don't you have unused leave you should be taking? I thought all of your old crew had several weeks of accumulated leave."

Kirk shook his head. "I decided not to do that just yet. There is too much to see to here, and I still have the problem of the Enterprise to solve."

"Problem?"

"She needs a captain, though not in any great hurry. Scotty's in acting command, and the shipyard docks are studying her before they decide how to take her to pieces." That hurt, to think of his beautiful ship stripped down to her bones. Kirk forced himself not to grimace, and he looked steadily at Lori.

"Your Mr. Spock didn't take her, then?" Lori asked, meeting his eyes sympathetically.

"Spock is no longer in Starfleet." He turned away, unable to meet that sympathetic gaze without wanting to tell her everything about it.

"I see," Lori said, but she seemed startled. Kirk wondered what she didn't understand, as she went on, "As to that dinner date, I get off duty today at 1730 hours. Shall we say an hour or so to get cleaned up, and I'll meet you at the Officer's Lounge?"

Kirk gave her a nod. "That's fine with me. Now, I'd better see if I can make some sense out of these reports before the staff meeting this afternoon."

"See you later, Jim," Lori disappeared as lightly as she had come. Kirk found himself thinking of her fondly for several minutes before he could get back to work.

\* \* \* \* \*

To Kirk's surprise, he enjoyed the dinner with Lori far more than he had anticipated. She was that rare combination, a good listener and an interesting conversationalist. They found many interests in common, and Kirk could feel the unaccustomed weight of the past days fall away from his mind as he relaxed. By the time they were leaving the lounge he felt the return of the self-confidence he usually had before taking this new job.

They had discovered that their quarters were in the same building, though on different floors. It was not far across the starbase from the club, and they walked along the shaded streets in the brisk evening air. Beside Kirk, Lori shivered slightly, and he took her arm, pulling her closer. She did not pull away.

"Being in the same building should prove handy," he said as they rode up in the lift.

Lori met his smile with a shy one of her own, giving him a sideways glance with her large brown eyes. "Would you believe me if I said that I arranged it?"

Kirk laughed. "No, but it's a nice thought. It means we can see a lot more of each other than if we lived on opposite sides of the base. And I do want to see more of you, Lori." The door opened to Lori's floor, and they crossed the corridor to her apartment.

"Won't you come in?" she asked, keying the door to open. As they walked into the room the sensiplates noted their arrival and turned on the lights. Kirk looked around appreciatively. She'd managed to transform the basically bleak service quarters into a comfortable home.

"Very nice," he said. "Makes mine feel even more new and empty by comparison."

"Give yourself time," answered Lori, putting down her wrap beside the fireplace. She sat and gestured to him to sit beside her. The fireplace bench was littered with pillows that Kirk scattered as he settled down. "I do a lot of traveling, and I need a place to come home to."

"I understand that," he replied. "Everyone needs to belong somewhere."

"Aren't we lucky to have Starfleet?" Lori asked quickly.

"Aren't we, though." But for a moment, he was not thinking of Starfleet in general, but of a white ship among the stars. He had to change the subject quickly. "I'm curious as to why we never met before. Did you attend the Academy?"

"Only for my final year. I started out training with the Diplomatic Corps and got involved in xeno-psychology. As part of my training I had some work with Starfleet officers, and that got me interested in the Service. I decided to switch when I realized I could get a lot of practical experience much faster in Starfleet. There's a lot less ceremony involved."

"Don't tell me about diplomats," he laughed. "They've been the source of a lot of my troubles. Now I guess I'll have a different set of problems." He reached across and took one of her hands in his. "I'm glad you're back, Lori, even if you are a diplomat."

She gave him a warm smile, back, squeezing his hand gently. "I thought of you while I was gone, Jim. It made me sorry to think you might be on leave when I returned."

"I'd rather wait for leave until you can join me," Kirk answered, taking her hand to his lips and kissing the fingers softly.

She withdrew her hand sharply. "Join you on leave?"

"Where would you like to go?" He was teasing, but only partly. He was aware of his heart pounding again, thinking of her beside him on the beach or skiing down the mountains in Europe.

"Aren't you getting along a bit fast?" she asked coldly.

"If you say so." Quite sure that her indignation was pretended, he pulled her closer to him, kissing her neck.

"Now wait a minute," she began and backed away. Then their eyes met, and he grinned at her. Lori bit her lip, struggling to keep back her own grin. "What makes you think..." She couldn't go on as a giggle burst out, and Kirk chuckled back at her. "What makes you think I want to go on leave with you?"

"Don't you?" he asked, giving her a smile.

"Of course I do, but you aren't supposed to know that yet."

"Oh." He slid away from her, scattering more pillows until he was at the far end of the bench. "Well, Admiral, what do you consider the appropriate timetable?" Kirk composed his face to look at her mildly, still sure she was only playing a game. It might be interesting at that, to play it her way.

Lori gave him a look of mock dignity. "Let's see. We could still have two or three more dinner dates, see a concert or two, perhaps attend the opening of the new exhibit at the Starfleet Museum in three weeks." His eyes widened in surprise. Three weeks - she couldn't be serious. "Then we could drive up into the Redwood Preserve for a picnic, perhaps sail a time or two on the Bay. And then you could start thinking about where you will ask me to go on leave."

"I was planning on doing all those things, plus a couple you haven't mentioned;

but I thought I'd save you some time so you could start getting your schedule organized now. Now I guess it'll have to wait and be a surprise." He gave her a look of mock disappointment, and Lori started to laugh.

"Jim, you're incredible!" And suddenly she slid across the cushions to him and was in his arms. "Shall we just consider all those things over with?"

Kirk drew back and looked her full in the eyes, just to be sure. "I was looking forward to that exhibit opening. Are you sure we can't go?"

"Can we talk about that when the time comes?" she asked, and kissed him hard.

With a chuckle, Kirk kissed her back. For a moment he was lost in the sensation of her warm body against his and the sweet scent of her hair. She seemed to melt right into his embrace, kissing him with a wild fervor he had not expected. Then he felt her pull away slightly, as if thinking about protesting again. Kirk was disappointed. He had not seriously expected her to play this kind of game.

"Do you have a timetable for this, too?" he asked a little bitterly.

"Not for you," she answered quickly. Her hands ran up his chest, and his chest muscles quivered to her soft touch across his shirt. Taking one of her hands in his again, he kissed her fingers as he drew her tightly against him with his other arm. Through the fine silk of her tunic, he could feel the firm lines of her back. His hand caressed her there, following the line of her back down and across the thin material covering her thigh. For a few moments he was aware only of Lori's body against his.

"These pillows aren't merely decorative, are they?" Kirk asked, drawing in a shuddering breath.

"Try one and see." There was something wild and free in her eyes, something that had not been there earlier. He brushed the pillows onto the floor with a sweep of one arm, then rolled down there himself. Lori remained sitting on the bench until he caught her sideways and tumbled her down on top of him. To his startlement, Lori hitched up the long skirt of the tunic and straddled him, effectively pinning him between her legs. "Are you asking for a fight?" she asked, running her tongue between her lips. Kirk thought it definite provocation.

"I fight dirty," he told her.

She shrugged. "I learned to fight in Starfleet, myself."

"Well, in that case." Before she could expect it, he flipped her sideways and caught her arm in one hand, trying to pull her up against him helplessly. Lori was not trapped. She pushed hard against the thumb and released his grasp, scrambling away. The long, loose legs of her pants tripped her up, just as Kirk grabbed at her. He caught only the pants as the fastening gave way, and she slipped out of reach, turning to look at him with a grin.

Kirk looked at the silky garment in his hand, totally surprised, and gave Lori the chance to be on the offensive again. She launched herself at him, tumbling them both over onto the pillows. Lori was on top again.

"You won't catch me like that twice," she grinned.

"I don't think I want to get away from you," he pointed out. "Now that you've got me, what do you intend to do with me?"

"Even the odds." Lori pulled on the fastenings of his shirt, and Kirk found himself barechested.

"That's not even," he protested, and he pulled at her tunic to release it. It tore loose in his grasp. "Ah, you don't spend a lot of money on clothes, do you?" he asked in surprise. Lori had nothing on underneath.

"I dress for the occasion." She quickly shed the few remaining pieces of her clothes. "Don't you think you're a little overdressed?"

"Now that you mention it, the thought was beginning to occur to me. What do you suggest?"

"Nothing much, just remove a thing or two." She dropped to one side, allowing him to remove the open shirt. "I said two," she reminded him as he lay back again.

"Impatience is not a virtue," he chided her; but the rest of his clothes soon joined hers in a pile beside the bench.

"You started it."

"So I did. Then I must remedy it. I won't hurry any more this evening." Kirk rolled back against the pillows and stretched out with his hands behind his head. "Got anything to drink?"

"Jim!" He suddenly found Lori back in his arms.

"Now what are you complaining about?" He raised his hands in mock despair, teasing her with a carefree grin. "Some women never know what they want."

"And some men never know how to tell," she countered.

"Fair enough." This game had gone on long enough. Kirk knew he could not tease her, or himself, any longer. "Shall I tell you what I want?" She nodded. "You." And he pulled her once again into his embrace. Lori did not pull away again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Over the next few months, Kirk found himself spending more and more of his free time with Lori. He had settled into the routine of his office work, but it never captured the whole of his attention the way being a starship captain had done. He was able to work his office staff to good advantage, and he was aware that they worked as hard for him as had his ship's crew. Yet, he never felt the same companionable response to any of them that he had once felt for his ship's officers. He noticed that even his relationship with Lori was not as satisfying while on the job. When he met her eyes during a staff meeting or spoke to her in Nogura's office, there was rarely a smile or a private glance between them to share.

When they were alone, however, their comfortable companionship returned. She opened up to him readily, and he then felt able to tease her and joke as he had the first night they spent together. Somehow, with their two very busy schedules, they found many chances to get away from the routine of Headquarters and do something active: skiing, hiking, sailing. Whenever there were two or three days in a row when both could get free, Kirk had dozens of ideas of things he wanted to do. His daydreams aloft had been of warm beaches and bright sun. Lori was willing to live all those daydreams with him. Occasionally she tried to get him to spend energy on something totally different than his work.

"Jim," she asked him one day. They were on the beach at Maui, watching the sun go down across the ocean as the clouds rolled behind them off the mountain. "How on earth did you ever stand being cooped up on a starship? It seems as though this whole world isn't big enough to hold you."

"There were compensations," he said flatly, thinking that no one who had never commanded a starship could possibly understand. Then he remembered that Lori was a xeno-psychologist and turned to meet her eyes. She was giving him a long, studying look. He kissed her quickly.

Lori snuggled against him, her warm, sandy body against his on one side, fitting into the curved place under his arm. "Remember that leave we said we'd take, one of these days?"

"Isn't this leave?" he teased her.

"Two days? Hardly. I mean a real leave - cleared desk with no calls for a couple of weeks."

"Just say the word. You're the one with the unpredictable schedule. My days are usually predictable, right down to the last minutes." Predictable, that was the problem. For a moment he felt the touch of despair, then shoved it back in his mind. He leaned over and kissed her nose.

"I have a conference in Warsaw for three days next week. After that I've tried to keep my calendar clear."

"Mmmmm. I'll have to check my own calendar, but I'm sure I could arrange to meet you there. I've never been to Warsaw, or much of eastern Europe." This was giving him several ideas. "I'll figure out a few places to visit, and maybe we could go skiing in the Alps later."

Lori pulled herself away from him and sat up. Kirk felt unaccountably cold along that side. "I'll count on it, Jim. Now, I'm getting hungry. I think I'll go back to our room and get cleaned up. My hair is a mess."

He ruffled the short waves with his hand. "I like it that way. But you go on and wash. I'll follow you in a few minutes." Lori understood his need for moments

of solitude, and she smiled. Gathering up her towel and sandals, she walked back across the sand toward their cottage. Kirk's eyes followed her figure making her way on the uneven ground, and for a moment he wondered if she really wanted to go to dinner immediately. He felt very content with his life.

As Lori stepped onto the grass by the cottage, she dropped the book out of her bag. Before she could stop to pick it up, a man walking along the edge of the beach bent down and picked it up for her. With a heart-stopping wrench, Kirk saw he was a Vulcan. For a brief moment, he wondered if the man were Spock. Then after a polite interchange with Lori, the man walked off; and Kirk saw it was a stranger.

Kirk realized he had sat up rigidly and forced himself to settle back down on his towel. It had been a long time since he had permitted himself to think of Spock, and he was surprised now to realize he was no longer angry with his distant friend. The peace and calm that Lori and the sun had given him made him think more kindly of Spock's refusal to accept the ship. Why did I even think it was so important? Kirk wondered to himself. I've found Will Decker to be Captain, and he'll be a wonder. Spock and I should be working together, a team as we were before. I miss him. Maybe when I get home, I'll write him a letter. We were good friends once, and I shouldn't let this stop that. No matter what he's doing on Vulcan, we could at least be friends again. The thought put the cap on the day. Kirk gathered up his possessions and followed Lori back to their cottage. He felt terrific.

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Lori was very glad that she had been able to work out the long leave time following her conference. Naturally her meeting went on longer than the scheduled three days, and Jim arrived in Warsaw before she was ready to join him. But he explored a little on his own while she worked, and then they were free. Even Lori was pleased to be away from Admiral Nogura and his demands. For two weeks they "followed the sun", going where they pleased and doing only as they wished. The stresses of Starfleet were far away.

That did not mean, however, that they idled away their time. As always, Jim Kirk tried to pack everything that he could do into the time available. Eventually, it began to feel to Lori as if he were trying to escape from something she didn't understand. She realized how much he missed his life aboard the starship, far more intensely than even he was aware of. Remembering his profile and the notes she had received after his promotion, she wondered if Jim were far less suited to flag rank than anyone suspected. He seemed to be running away from his responsibilities as a staff admiral. No, she corrected herself, simply comparing his performance there with his proven abilities as a starship captain and suffering in the comparison. Lori also knew that no one else considered him inadequate; but because he could not be the best admiral, in the same way he had been the best captain, Jim was unhappy with himself. Lori was afraid that this would not continue much longer. Either he would withdraw into himself and passively accept the position, or quit and find a ship of his own to command. Either way Nogura would lose his prize exhibit, and Lori would be in trouble. She didn't know what she was going to do.

In trying to avoid a decision, Lori was not inclined to make Jim relax on their travels. Consequently, they were both exhausted when they finally returned to San Francisco. To make matters even worse, Lori had not been able to sleep at all in the tube ride from Gibralter. The 84 minute trip had been totally disrupted by a crying baby and a bratty little toddler. Neither child had settled into the weightlessness of the descent or the stress of the ascent. Lori had withdrawn to the far side of the cabin, though Jim had played with the older child while the mother rocked the baby. It was quite late at night when their airtram from the Los Angeles station finally dropped them off in San Francisco. By the time the hired car had deposited them at their building, it was almost dawn.

"A place to come home to," Jim said quietly as they paid off the driver and struggled with their luggage.

Lori was a little surprised. He'd never called his apartment home before. "I'm glad to be back, too. That's part of the fun of holidays."

They made their way into the dim and deserted lobby. Lori stopped for their mail while Jim loaded the bags onto a cart to send up in the lift.

"Jim, you have a letter from Vulcan," she said in surprise. She heard him drop a bag on his way over to snatch the envelope out of her hand. Ripping it open, he pulled out the contents; his face fell as he scanned it, the eager expression replaced by one of severe disappointment. "What's wrong," she asked gently.

"Let's get upstairs," he said roughly and turned back to the lift.

Lori followed, grimly determined to get this out in the open. They stopped first on her floor, and Kirk helped her to the door. He seemed about to leave as soon as he saw she was settled, but she forestalled that. "Jim, will you tell me what's the matter?"

"Do you know what Gol is?" was all he asked.

She shook her head. "Is it Vulcan? I told you I don't know anything about Vulcans."

"Do you think any of your books might have something? I need to know, Lori." Dropping the letter on a table, he crossed the room to her desk.

"Try the bottom shelf. I should have a cassette or two about Vulcan. If Gol is important, it will be discussed." He turned to search, his back toward her, and Lori picked up the letter.

"Dear Jim," she read. "Please do not expect a reply to your letter to Spock. I am sorry to have to tell you he has left home to join the community at Gol. You might say that is the Vulcan equivalent of a monastery."

"Since Spock returned from Starfleet, his behavior has been difficult to understand. He seems determined to forget his human heritage and to avoid any human contact at all. I realize that something must have driven him away from you and Starfleet, so I am keeping your letter unopened to give to Spock should he come home."

"I truly wish I could do more than this. If I learn of anything, I will be sure to write again. In the meantime, please accept my congratulations on your new post in Starfleet. Peace and long life, Amanda."

"Who's Amanda?" Lori asked.

"Spock's mother." Jim had found the Vulcan cassette and was running it through quickly on her desk viewer. "Here, I've found something. It is not likely that the average Federation official will ever have the opportunity to meet one of the Masters at Gol. Should the occasion arise, it must be remembered that the Masters are to be awarded the highest honor and decorum. A Master at Gol outranks any other Vulcan standing, except the Prime Counselor of the High Council."

"That's not much to go on," Lori said critically. "It certainly sounds impressive, but doesn't explain why Spock can't answer your letter."

"There's a footnote." Jim readjusted the view and read again. "Gol is one area of Vulcan totally restricted to outworlders. Our information seems to indicate that it is a quasi-religious group similar in function to an ancient monastery or retreat." Jim chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully.

Lori decided she'd had enough. If Spock had done something to Jim, she wanted to know about it. The hurt expression on his face alone was enough to make her want to breach those restrictions at Gol and confront Spock, if that would help. "Jim, why did Spock leave the Enterprise?"

He reached down to the viewer and removed the cassette, staring at it blankly. At first she thought he wouldn't speak, then he said, "He refused to be the captain."

"That doesn't make sense."

Kirk shrugged. "That's all I know about it. He didn't even say goodbye to me. When I told him I was taking the position on Nogura's staff, we argued. He thought I should stay as captain, and he told me flat out he would not be the new captain." He turned and walked past Lori, but not before she had seen the bleak expression reflected in his eyes. "I thought he was just trying to use that as a lever to get me to stay; he knew what it meant for me to have him take over my ship. So I put his name on the top of the list I gave to Nogura. I didn't think he'd refuse when

he saw it was inevitable."

"But he did?"

"He not only refused, he resigned. Right there; three hours later he was on a shuttle to Vulcan. Why, I don't know. He didn't speak to me after that."

"Spock didn't even leave a message?"

"None." The hurt of that single word was almost more than Lori could stand to hear. She went up behind Jim and put her arms around him. He turned back to her and held her tightly. "Lori, for five years we had been as close as I thought it possible for two men to be. I never understood what changed that. Finally I decided I had to find out why. That's when I wrote that letter."

"This seems pretty final."

"Yes, it does." Kirk picked up the letter carefully and tucked it into a pocket. "Still, I am going to try one last thing. I'll find out what Gol really is. Maybe after a sort of novice period, I'll be able to write to Spock again."

If Spock had been in the room at that moment, Lori would probably have slapped him. Despite all Spock had done to hurt Jim, the caring and love still remained. She thought Jim would miss his friend for the rest of his life, and her heart ached for him. Putting her hand on his arm, she said, "Don't go up to your place yet. Stay with me tonight."

Kirk shook his head. "I think I'd rather just be alone for a while. We've had a busy couple of weeks, and we have to be on duty tomorrow. You need some sleep after that tube ride."

"If you're sure, Jim." She reached up and kissed him. "Good night."

"Sleep well, Lori. I'll see you at the office. I think I'll go over to the Alienologist's office and see what more I can find out. I need to know." He disappeared out the door with his baggage.

Lori collapsed into bed, thinking furiously about Jim. The vacation had been a wonderful holiday, exciting and filled with chances for them to learn much about each other. Jim had become very dear to her, in a way difficult to explain, and she thought he was beginning to feel the same way about her. She felt the ache in her heart for him increase.

Remembering his eager reaching out for the letter and the deep disappointment at its contents, Lori wondered what would happen next. Jim had written to his old friend trying to recapture something lost and had been rebuffed. Obviously he needed something she could not provide. As sleep slowly overcame her, Lori made a resolution. Whatever help Jim needed from her, he could have. She cared enough about him that she would do whatever he wanted if it would help lift some of the weight on his spirits.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lori was greeted at work the next day by an almost overwhelming pile of correspondence, files, and office memos. She immediately put her mind to business, and it was late in the afternoon before she realized that Jim hadn't contacted her yet. I wonder if he learned anything at the Alienologist's office, she thought, as she started to clear her desk before leaving for the day. The thought made her curious enough to look through her office records to see if she could find any reference to Gol. She was still leafing through one volume when Kirk appeared at her door.

"Hi, ready to leave?" he asked.

Lori quickly set the book back on the shelf. "I guess so. Some of this has been sitting here for two weeks. Another day can hardly matter." she joined him at the door and switched off the lights. "Where have you been all day?"

"Doing pretty much the same as you - catching up." He took her arm as they walked across the lobby to the lift. "I did find time to visit Alienology."

"Learn anything?"

"Enough." His voice sounded carefully controlled, only a hint of dismay escaping. "The community at Gol is a very select group which designs the disciplines that enable Vulcans to overcome their emotions. Spock always felt his human side to be a handicap. I can see why Gol would appeal to him."

"You don't think you'll ever hear from him then?"

"I might. I don't suppose it would be the same, though." He shrugged, trying to appear unconcerned, and Lori's heart tugged again. "Might as well forget about him."

"I suppose that would be best." She tried to change the subject to something a little less emotional. "I called the commissary and had some groceries delivered this afternoon. Want to come to my place for supper?"

He gave her a small smile. "I'm not very hungry."

Lori decided to misread that remark. "I know. All that restaurant food has filled me up too much lately. I can just fix some sandwiches, and you can make a salad. OK?"

"You take good care of me, Lori." Jim took her hand and squeezed it. "OK. I'll come for supper."

Going through the routine tasks of setting the table, fixing vegetables for a salad, and toasting bread, was a pleasant and easy way of forgetting the concerns that depressed him. Before long Kirk was back to his teasing self, and Lori gladly encouraged it. While he tossed the salad at the table, she lit a fire in her fireplace and set candles on the table. It felt very secure and comfortable in her tiny apartment.

After they ate, they settled down before the fire to watch the flames in the darkness. Neither spoke much, snuggled together among the pillows. Lori was almost asleep and thought Jim was, too, when he spoke.

"Lori, have you ever given any thought to getting married?"

That startled her fully awake. "No, not really," she said slowly, wondering what he had in mind. "My work keeps me very busy, and I travel a lot. I've never wanted children, and I never thought of marriage for any other reason."

"And you've never met the right man?"

"Never before now," she said honestly and looked up into his eyes. "And you?"

"I've thought of it a few times," he admitted. "Once or twice it was pretty serious, but somehow it never worked out. I'd given up thinking about it—until I met you. I enjoyed our leave together, Lori. You're a very special person."

"So are you, Jim, and we get along very well. But I'm content with things the way they are; marriage isn't necessary." She wasn't sure she loved him quite that way, and she certainly did not want a family.

"We aren't really being very respectable, otherwise."

Lori stared at him. "Where did you get that ancient idea?"

"We're admirals, Lori. 'Starfleet's finest.' I've had a couple of hints dropped my way lately that what's OK for normal folks is not acceptable for us. People in power," his voice grew suddenly bitter, "can't live like others. We have to be perfect."

"Oh." Well, that idea certainly explained a few things. She settled back into the crook of his arm with a sigh. "And you think that means we ought to get married?"

"Don't you?"

"Only assuming you could stand to live with me full time."

"I could do more than just stand it, Lori. I'd welcome it. We've spent all our free time together for weeks, and I find myself more and more fascinated by you." The easy gentle evening had disappeared. He leaned over and kissed her hands. "I couldn't let you go from my life very easily."

"I've felt the same way for a long time, Jim," Lori replied as she returned the kiss with interest. Resolutely she pushed her doubts away, though she felt she had to qualify her answer. "I'll be willing to try being married for awhile—say a standard one year contract. You're pretty fascinating yourself, in case you didn't realize it."

For answer he drew her tightly into his arms, his lips seeking hers hungrily and pulling her close as if she might disappear from sight. Reassuring him, Lori wrapped her arms firmly around his back. Their bodies came together in the familiar way, his touch exciting her into longing for their complete union. They both needed

each other, she realized, and was happy to think that his troubles would be lost in this new happiness between them. It was a long time before she even realized they had spoken of marriage and make their plans without either one of them speaking the word "love."

\* \* \* \* \*

For Jim Kirk the next few months were happy, a time in which for the first time in years his personal life overshadowed his life in Starfleet. Actually marrying and living together instead of simply spending a good deal of time with one another was a new experience for both Kirk and Lori. There were days of settling in: choosing a new apartment, working out their living schedules, doing without time alone. Through it all, there was Lori helping him, giving him joy simply by being with him. From friend and lover she became wife and mother as well, the only partner he needed and wanted in his life.

At the same time, if he thought about it at all, Kirk realized that he was not putting all the thought into his staff job that he had into being a starship captain. He found he literally hated staff meetings and the necessary reports Headquarters demanded, but instead of fighting them, he handled them as quickly as possible by giving them to his staff to complete. Nor did he give anywhere near as much of his off-duty time to work as he had always done in the past. Weekends and evenings were reserved for Lori, and Kirk resented any time that they were apart.

Yet, Lori's position as Nogura's special representative to the New Humans and a member of Starfleet's diplomatic corps meant that she was obligated to spend a great deal of time traveling. Usually this was on Earth, at conferences set up with the myriad of special interest groups which had contacts with Starfleet. During the first months of their marriage, Lori seemed able to keep these meetings to a minimum, and she was never called off-planet at all. Little by little, so slowly that at first Kirk was not aware of it, the number and length of her meetings increased. Federation conferences or academic symposiums became part of her responsibilities, and the inconvenience of being married to a diplomat grew more obvious.

Kirk was critical of diplomats. He had said so enough times in the past that he was not particularly welcome in diplomatic circles. So, despite his willingness and interest in sharing whatever Lori did, Kirk almost never accompanied Lori on her trips. Once or twice he arranged to go off-planet with her, but something always came up at Headquarters to prevent him going. Eventually it grew to be accepted between them that Lori's trips were her own, something in which Kirk had no part.

In order to fill the time that Lori had filled at first, Kirk slowly found himself paying more attention to his job. His duties as head of Fleet Deployment were numerous and complicated. Starfleet was large and growing larger, adding dozens of new ships and two entire starbases in the slightly over a year that Kirk had been at Headquarters. It meant constant work just to stay abreast of all the details. Someone in his office was on duty at all times, and Kirk began going to work earlier each morning and staying later in the evening as the weeks passed. Even Lori, who was also committed to her work, began to tease him about it, but it made no difference. Having gathered the reins of his office into his own hands, there seemed to be no way to relax his hold.

To his surprise, Kirk began to realize that he did not want to let go. Once when Lori returned from a lengthy trip with four days of leave due her, he found it impossible to take the time to spend those days with her. Lori made only a small protest. Days began to pass by when they didn't even see each other though they were both on the base at the same time. During their first few months Kirk had waited up for Lori if she were late, and she had done the same for him. Now he often came home to find her asleep. The hours each had stolen from their schedules to find time to be together grew fewer and fewer. Passionate hours once spent in each other's arms had gradually shrunk to a brief, desperate time of seeking intense ecstasy.

Kirk did not understand it. He still found Lori as exciting as ever, his pulse racing whenever he was near her. For him she still was perfection physically, one of

the few women where love and sex came together for him. Lori seemed to feel the same way about him, responding eagerly to his touch—whenever they could make the time to be together. Kirk knew he needed her still but resentfully began to wonder if she needed him, or in fact ever had. As the stipulated year of the marriage drew to a close, Kirk wasn't sure what they would do next. As he had done so often lately, Kirk avoided the topic in his mind.

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It was still fairly early one afternoon when Kirk returned to their apartment. He had been intending to work later, but his yeoman had unaccountably managed to clear his desk by the end of duty hours. Wearily he rode up in the lift, with some thought of sitting and doing nothing all weekend; even his customary exercise seemed too much to handle. To his surprise, Lori was home before him. Dressed in a most uncustomary dress and apron, she hurried out of the dining area to greet him. Kirk frowned in puzzlement. "Have I forgotten something—an invitation or a celebration of some sort?"

Lori kissed him and shook her head. "Nothing like that. I just decided it was time we spent an evening together, for a change."

Kirk walked across to the bar and made himself a drink. "I couldn't have faced company tonight. Do you know what happened about the Fleet maneuvers this morning?" He drowned half the drink in a gulp.

"Nope. Don't want to know. We are not going to talk shop." Her wide eyes crinkled a little as she smiled, and she came over beside him. Kirk turned and put his arm around her waist, following her into the cooking area.

"Whatever you say. What are you doing in here? It smells terrific."

"Morna gave me those recipes from the dinner we had at her place a while back. I thought I'd try them out. You seemed to like them pretty well." She gave him an unreadable glance. "Or was it simply the hostess you liked?"

"It was an excellent dinner," Kirk replied, wondering what made her ask it like that. He rested his hands on her hips as she turned toward the stove.

"Hmmm. This will be ready in about fifteen minutes. Why don't you get changed while I finish up."

Kirk nuzzled the back of her neck for a moment, but she didn't turn and return the embrace. With a little sigh he finished the drink in a swift motion and went to change his clothes.

By the time Kirk returned Lori had transformed the tiny dining area and kitchen from a work place to a quiet haven. She was just lighting the candles, and they sat down to dinner almost at once. At first they were silent, Lori having denied them their first and usual topic of conversation. For some minutes Kirk concentrated on his food, wondering what else they ever talked about. Then he remembered a funny thing that had happened to a mutual friend during a conference that morning. It wasn't quite 'talking shop', so he told her about it, and eventually the conversation grew into a real one. They ate, cleared up, and finally took their drinks into the living area to relax.

"Are you going to tell me what's on your mind?" Kirk asked as they settled down before the fireplace.

"Was I that obvious?" she asked, making a little face at him.

Kirk grinned and nodded. She had settled down into the crook of his arm, but pulled herself up and away as she spoke. Kirk felt a little stab of something begin to worry him.

Lori looked only at her drink. "I got word this morning, I'm going to have to go to the Federation Conference next month on Babel."

"That's shop talk," he reminded her, trying to avoid what he was afraid was coming.

"Yes, but it's pertinent. With the travel time and all, I'll be gone nearly a month." Their eyes met, but he didn't say anything, leaving her to tell him the bad news. "I'll be gone past the date of our marriage contract expiration."

He drew his lips together and looked at his own drink. She had said "expiration" not "renewal". There was something of lead in his chest where his

heart once had been. "So, you thought we'd better discuss it now."

Lori nodded. She was looking at her hands, or the table, or her glass - anywhere but at him. Slowly she began, "Jim, when we first decided to get married, I told you I had never really wanted to be married before." Her customary ease in speaking, her gentle way of making everything seem right was gone. She was embarrassed and upset, and Kirk was uncomfortable listening to her. He rose quickly and crossed the room, looking at her from a distance.

"Yes, I remember," he said, not trying to make it easy for her.

"I thought that this might change, being married to you. You're a very special person, and we've been happy together. I treasure all our moments."

"But you still don't want to be married, is that it?" he asked bluntly, not giving her the time for any more embarrassing evasions.

Miserably she nodded. "It isn't just you, Jim. I really mean that. You are exciting, and I'm very fond of you. But I don't feel like a wife, and I never wanted a husband."

"We've gotten along pretty well, so far," he defended himself. Although secretly, he was sure she was right, it still hurt to end their closeness. "Why should we change it now, when it is still working?"

"It isn't working, Jim. Can't you see that? We're great together in bed, when we have the time for it. But when we're not there, what else is there?"

"I had thought there was more, Lori. A lot more. You've helped me over some rough places in my life, and I thought we were partners in a lot more than just bed. Are you really saying you no longer care for me?" He could feel he wasn't handling this well, either. It was too close to his heart, and he still hadn't stabilized after all the earlier changes in his life.

"Jim, all I mean is that we are only good friends and lovers. We're not a married pair, and I don't see why we should keep pretending that we ever can be more than we are right now."

Suddenly Lori stood up and walked across to him. She looked so appealing in her soft dress, her hair shining in the dim light, that Kirk's heart flipped slightly. He reached out and touched her face gently, and she kissed his hand as it touched her lips. "Jim..." she began, but he stopped her.

"Don't, Lori. Don't say anything else. It's all right to let it go just like this, if that's what you want. What we've had was very good, something we both needed. Don't let the need to change spoil it or ruin our memories of what it was." He gathered her into his arms. "We'll never be totally apart again, after this. I still am fascinated by you."

"And you are as exciting as ever." Her lips were against his, her warm body pressed close against him. For a moment he was lost in her presence, yet aware they were both trying to deny the reality of what was to come. "There are still all those weekends ahead, as we did before," Lori whispered.

Kirk didn't answer, knowing that she was lying to them both if she really thought that would work out. If they parted now, they would stay friends, but never again lovers. At the moment he didn't want to think that far ahead, aware only of Lori in his arms, her body demanding and her kisses growing more insistent. His hands reached for the fastening of her dress, which fell into a small pile at her feet. He decided to think about details later. For now there was only Lori.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ten days later Lori departed on schedule for Babel. The last days had been filled with a sweet and bitter new relationship between them. Kirk had gone back to his earlier pattern of leaving his work behind each night and had given her a full week of his attention. She had seemed happy for it, though he wasn't quite sure why. He began to wonder why Lori had ever married him in the first place. It seemed less and less real to him that she could ever have loved him the way he loved her, if she could leave him now for so little reason. Perhaps she had only accepted him out of some misplaced desire to help him over the big hurdle in his life. Once, from a comment of hers he even thought Admiral Nogura might have expected this marriage as a way of getting him settled into Headquarters routine, but Kirk

dismissed it quickly. Lori was too honest, too open with him for that to be a very real possibility. No, he decided that Lori had loved him, at least for awhile. Kirk supposed he should be glad he had the time he did have with her.

Still, it was very difficult to take Lori to the starliner and get her settled in with her luggage. When she returned, the time of the marriage would be over. They had already decided that he would find a new place and leave Lori's things in the old one for her to make arrangements when she returned.

The warning bell sounded, indicating time for all non-travelers to leave the ship. Kirk turned to Lori, whose face was threatening to crumble into tears. He took her in his arms and held her closely. There didn't seem to be anything possible to say that hadn't been said already.

"I'll miss you, Lori. Call when you get back," he said finally. Her face lifted to his and their lips met. Kirk could not keep the passion he still felt out of the kiss. Holding her was still magic.

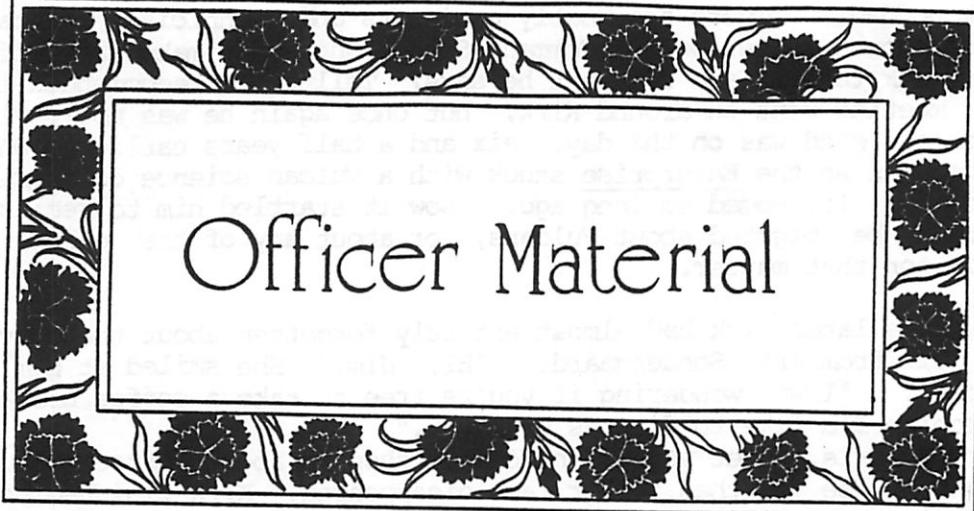
"I'll miss you, too." Lori pulled away, wiping her eyes and sniffling a little. She fumbled in a case for a tissue and didn't look at him for a moment. When she did, all she said was, "Good-bye, Jim."

"Good-bye, Lori." Kirk turned on his heel and left the cabin. Stony-faced, he found the transporter and beamed back down to the spaceport. Yet he could not resist watching for a last moment as the port viewscreens showed the departure of the liner. Much too quickly the ship was out of range, taking Lori with it and out of his life.

Kirk headed out of the terminal, his feet automatically finding the route back to Headquarters and his own offices as his mind still remembered Lori. It hurt, there was no doubt about that. In the past months he'd had too many such losses, and he wasn't really over the first ones. Yet, when he was honest with himself, he began to wonder if the only reason he wanted Lori to stay was because he wanted to be the one to end it.

It didn't matter now. Lori was gone, and he had work to do back at his office. Starfleet was all he had, was what he had always had no matter what else would come and go in his life. Kirk's back straightened, and he flexed his hands a moment as he walked. Alone, he walked through the door into his own department and went back to work.





## Officer Material

If he lived to be one hundred years old, Jim Kirk knew he would never find staff meetings either interesting or helpful. As captain of a starship, he had learned to make the time of his officers, both in and out of meetings, count. At headquarters, however, with the luxury of time for command decisions, meetings tended to take the place of action. Kirk usually managed to get through them by planning out his own work schedule or mentally reviewing other reports he was due to make.

Today, however, a stray comment caught his attention. "He is the best science officer in the Fleet." Kirk's ears perked up, but he didn't turn. Who were they talking about? He identified the speaker as Admiral Sirik of the chief Scientist's Office. Sirik went on, "I fail to see why it is so impossible to give Sonak the assignment to which his skill entitles him."

Sonak. For a minute Kirk had wondered if someone had managed to get Spock back into Starfleet. Bardan, from the Personnel Division, interrupted his thoughts. "Sonak is only a lieutenant commander with just a few years of starship experience. We know he's too good for anything but primary class duty, but most of the starship captains don't see it that way."

"You mean all they see is those pointed ears," came a comment from Commodore de Acebo.

Everyone turned to stare at her, and Sirik asked coldly, "Is there some purpose to that statement?"

"Sure. Most of the starship captains assigned from San Francisco are Humans, and they aren't eager to have a Vulcan science officer on board to give them trouble." She looked around. "Well, don't blame me for pointing out the obvious. It's true and you know it."

Kirk decided it was time to speak up. If anyone here had the idea that he'd gotten rid of Spock because he was a Vulcan, it was time to straighten them out. "My science officer was a Vulcan, and I found his help most valuable. Judging by Sonak's record, he would be equally valuable to any captain."

"You want Sonak for the Enterprise, Jim? Even after getting rid of Spock you're still willing to use a Vulcan?" That was Thargen, the Andorian from the Weapons Board. Kirk could understand his grievance against Vulcans, none of whom would contribute to weapons research.

Kirk shrugged. "I don't command her anymore, but I'm helping Will Decker look for suitable officers. If Sonak is available for science officer, I'm sure Will would be happy to have him."

Bardan looked happily at Kirk. "Are you serious? Sonak is going to Command

School at the moment, but perhaps that won't be a problem. Isn't the Enterprise still down for refitting?"

Kirk nodded. "There are mostly engineers and technicians on board right now. Waiting for Sonak to get out of Command School shouldn't make any difficulties. Why don't you talk to Will and see what he says? Tell him I recommended it to him."

The meeting went on around Kirk, but once again he was not paying attention. This time his mind was on the day, six and a half years earlier, when he had been the new captain so the Enterprise stuck with a Vulcan science officer—and had found he liked it. It seemed so long ago. Now it startled him to realize that Humans could still be bigoted about Vulcans, or about any of the other races in the Federation for that matter.

Two days later Kirk had almost entirely forgotten about the conversation when he got a call from Kris Sondergaard. "Hi, Jim." She smiled at him over the desk comm screen. "I was wondering if you're free to take a coffee break with me. I have a problem I'd like to discuss with you."

"Agreed, Kris. Meet you in the coffee shop in about fifteen minutes, okay?"

"Right. See you then." Her face disappeared. Kirk finished up the report he was reviewing and thought about Kris. She was one of his oldest friends in Starfleet, having been in the same Academy class. Once, he had saved Kris's life in a survival training exercise. Kris had literally saved his when Janet had told him she wouldn't marry him. The day after graduation, Kirk had been part of the cadet honor guard when Kris had married another classmate, Mike Stevens. He hoped that this problem was nothing between Kris and Mike.

In the coffee shop Kirk had to wait a few minutes before Kris arrived. She came in the door at a swift pace and saw him across the room, waving as she went to pick up her coffee at the counter. Kirk gazed at her fondly, seeing her as she had been while they were students. He always found it difficult to believe that since then she had managed to produce three children, command Luna Base, and stay married to Mike, currently the first officer on the Discovery.

Kris sat down with a sigh, but gave Kirk a smile. He must have appeared worried, for she said, "Don't worry, Jim. This isn't a personal problem at all."

"Glad to hear it," he replied with an answering smile. "But then what is on your mind?"

She picked up her coffee and sipped slowly. "I heard about the conversation at the staff meeting a couple days ago, when you recommended Sonak be assigned to the Enterprise. I'd forgotten you've worked regularly with a Vulcan. Maybe you can help me with the one I have."

He looked at her, tilting his head questioningly.

"One of my responsibilities in Training Division at the moment is a rather large group of ensigns who did not attend the Academy. Most of them are in the sciences and have attended their local science academy or whatever they call it. My only Vulcan just now is a young man—a child really—who is a genius; he finished school with a flourish some years ahead of the norm even for a Vulcan. He can't be more than seventeen standard years old."

"That's still a child," Kirk agreed. "So what's the problem?" He could envision several.

"He's scared to death of me. Really, I mean it," she went on as Kirk started to chuckle. "If I could leave him in the cosmology lab to do nothing but experiments, he'd be as happy as an Aldebaran shell mouth and about as useful to Starfleet."

"But as it is, you have to turn him into an officer. Okay, Kris, what do you want me to do?"

"Can I send him to you?"

"I'm in charge of Fleet Deployment, not astrophysics," he reminded her.

"That's the idea. I'll tell him I'm getting him acquainted with other aspects of the job. I wouldn't dare send him to anyone else yet. We'd lose him. But I'll lose him if I keep him." Kris's eyes were twinkling. She knew she had him hooked.

"Give me two days to figure out what to do with him and read his file. Call

Bardan at Personnel, and then you can send him over. He can fix up the paperwork, the way we took care of the Sonak thing." Kirk finished his coffee and stood up. "Now I'm late for an appointment."

"Just one more thing, Jim. Do you know anything about Mike's promotion?"

"Not a word. Why?"

"He's due for a captaincy, and we can't find out a thing. I'm offered an assignment off-planet, and we need to know something. It's still my turn to stay with the kids."

"I'll let you know. Give me some time to dig around. Now, I really do have to go."

The next morning Kirk sat down with his office staffing charts to see what could be managed in the way of a position for a new Vulcan ensign. It proved to be easier than he thought. At any given time there were roughly 35 people working under his direct command, not including some civilian clerical workers who did routine filing and record-keeping. Some of the younger officers, he noticed, had been there a very long time and had very little startime logged. Kirk frowned and began to check over personal records.

Eventually he called Lt. Carillo into his office. "You seem to have been in Fleet Deployment for quite a while, Lieutenant," Kirk observed. "Have you been keeping up with your flight time requirements?"

"Just barely, sir," Carillo admitted. "My rating is due to lapse in weapons control, also. Somehow I haven't had time to get to the range for training."

"Did you join Starfleet to be an office manager?" Kirk asked. It didn't seem likely, but one never knew.

"No, sir. My work at the Academy was in subspace radio; but communications techs don't have much choice in their assignments. And we seem to need a lot of office managers."

"As of right now, you're back in radio. There's a six-month course coming up, day after tomorrow, I think. I'll see you're in it."

Carillo stared. "But the office, sir. No one knows what--"

"Do you want to stay here forever?"

"No, sir!"

"Then clear out your desk and give your office charts to Yeoman Smead. She'll just have to cope."

"But Smead is working on the assignment for the war games."

Kirk smiled. "I think I have just the person in mind for the job. Dismissed." Kirk moved the file on his desk as Carillo turned away. "One more thing, Lieutenant. If you want to be in communications, you're going to have to fight on your own behalf. As long as the radios are manned, Starfleet doesn't care who does it."

Carillo stopped at the door and turned back with a wide grin. "Thank you, sir. I'll remember that."

That afternoon when everyone else had gone for the day, Kirk went back to examine in detail the records of his entire staff. When he'd come into the office, Admiral Nogura had told him to leave staff problems to his office manager and Personnel Division. With the work involved in deployment, Kirk had been happy to do just that. Now he wondered if he hadn't made a mistake. When he'd been a starship captain, he had known a great deal about every one of his 430 crew members.

Kirk was still at his self-imposed task two days later when Sejan, the Vulcan ensign, reported to his office. Kirk looked up from his papers and said pleasantly, "Please sit down, Ensign."

"I am quite comfortable standing," the young Vulcan replied stiffly.

"When a command officer tells you to sit down, Ensign, it is not a request," Kirk told him, biting back a chuckle. "It is an order designed to prevent a stiff neck. Sit down."

Sejan sat. His back was rigid and his hands fell awkwardly to one side. Oh, Lord, he is so young, Kirk thought, looking at him appraisingly. He should be

playing, not working in a lab. Then he remembered that Vulcans stop playing when they are seven years old. Kirk sighed.

"Cmdr. Sondergaard has sent you to my department in order to give you some experience in Starfleet branches outside your own specialty. I trust you are aware of the activities in Fleet Deployment. Your current assignment is to work with Yeoman Smead on the war games scheduled for next month." He leaned forward to the desk comm and called Smead into the room.

Kirk considered Smead one of the brighter lights in his office. A charming girl with oriental ancestry and startling blue eyes, she tended to giggle a lot and was as friendly as a new puppy. Smead came into the room at his call, still carrying on a conversation with Kirk's personal yeoman. To Kirk's surprise, Sejan totally froze when he saw her, and for a moment Kirk thought he saw a glint of agony in the young Vulcan's eyes. Fascinating.

"Good morning, Admiral. Is this the new ensign? Come on, Sejan, there's a lot to be done, and I've just been handed the job of office manager."

She breezed out with Sejan in her wake, and Kirk watched the two narrowly. Sejan was unduly disturbed by the cheerful young woman, and Kirk decided to keep a watchful eye on the situation.

His consideration of the problem was interrupted by another call. "Hi, Jim. How's everything over in your little hideaway?" asked Carlotta de Acebo. Kirk barely knew her, but he remembered it was her comment that had started the conversation at the staff meeting.

"Same as ever," he said noncommittally. "What can I do for you, Commodore?"

"I've decided to send you another communications tech."

"How do I deserve such luck?" he asked drily.

"By just being Jim Kirk. I've been thinking over what you said the other day..." Kirk suddenly had the sinking feeling no one would ever forget that. "...and I thought you might be the answer to a little Vulcan girl I have here. She's a junior lieutenant, expert in languages, and unable to adjust to Starfleet discipline. We're going to lose her when her three-year initial tour is over this summer--unless you can get her to stay."

"Listen, Carlotta, I'm full up on staff. Can't it wait until later? I've got a lot of things to do besides baby-sitting Vulcans."

"Oh, you can get rid of someone else. I heard what you did for Carillo. Did you know he's been trying to get into that radio course for the past three sessions?" Kirk was startled. "I'll send T'Lur over after lunch."

Fortunately Kirk knew exactly what he wanted to do to make room for another Vulcan misfit. He called Anne Norman into the room. "Anne, what are you doing right now?"

"Right this minute, sir? Logistics reports from Sector IV. They're due in the chief's office by the end of the week."

"Get ready to turn them over to a new lieutenant who'll be arriving this afternoon. Have you applied for starship duty, Anne?"

"Yes, sir. I served on the Albany right after graduation, but I got rotated to ground duty sooner than I would have liked."

"And you've been here over a year. I'm getting you back up there as soon as you can instruct T'Lur about your duties. Pack up and be ready to leave."

Norman stared at him, her freckled face astonished. "Just like that, sir?" He nodded and she broke into a wide grin. "Whatever you say." She turned and fairly danced out of the room.

Kirk turned to his intercom and called Personnel Division. Since Bardan had started this whole thing, he was going to have to help Kirk settle it.

To Kirk's utter surprise, Bardan said, "Why, Jim Kirk, I was just going to call you."

"Don't tell me. You have a Vulcan you can't place, and you think my office is just the spot for him."

"Cast your bread upon the waters..." Bardan grinned. "Actually, it's not a Vulcan, I have, instead, a pacifist Andorian."

"That, my friend, is a contradiction in terms."

"It's still what I have. I think his family put him in Starfleet to instill in him the martial feeling a proper Andorian is supposed to have. Anyway, since you seem to be adopting some of our little strays this week, will you take Thurlett?"

"Okay, if you will do me two favors in return. I need a ship assignment for Anne Norman to make room for de Acebo's Vulcan linguist, and I want to send Ben Pierce to medic's school. How that kid ever ended up in Security is beyond me."

"Ben Pierce, medic's course; Norman, ship. Right. I'll get back to you on both of those, and Thurlett will be over at the beginning of next week."

Gradually, over the next month, the personnel in Kirk's office went through a total turnover. After Thurlett arrived, there was a brief pause during which Kirk thought everyone had forgotten about his supposed interest in young aliens. Then, as word apparently spread past the original group present at the staff meeting, people began to call him from other offices. Among others he got a Deltan girl so plain she had no confidence in her own worth, several more Vulcans too smart for their own good, half a dozen Andorians ranging from the total pacifist to one out-and-out warmonger, and an assortment of young Humans with varying problems. Kirk, who had not taken a personal interest in his office staff since arriving, began to be involved in the young people's activities. He learned more than he wanted to know about current dances, clothing, and the sex lives of nearly everyone except the Vulcans.

He explained it to Kris one afternoon over a drink, when he called to tell her he had heard about Mike's promotion. She met him at the Officer's Club, and while they waited for Mike to arrive, he told her about Sejan.

"Remember, you thought he was afraid of you, Kris?" Kirk asked as they found their table.

"Was he ever! I couldn't look at him without his blushing bright green. And then I could see he was furious with himself for that!"

"I had two ideas about it. First I thought maybe you were mothering him too much." Kirk ignored Kris's skeptical snort. "He was still such a child--though you should see him now. But his own mother probably hasn't touched him since he was seven years old."

Kris was startled. "Seven? Jim, are you sure?"

"I have it on the best authority," Kirk replied, thinking for a moment of Spock. "And maybe that's what you were doing, and he didn't recognize it for what it was. Actually, he thought you were trying to seduce him." Kirk's eyes twinkled at her, and Kris's jaw fell in astonishment.

"You're not serious."

"I am. One night I went back late for a report I had meant to read at home and chanced on a bull session. Sejan, a couple of other Vulcans, and some of my Human men were huddled about a viewscreen. They all almost died of embarrassment when I walked in--as well they should have. You should have seen what was on that screen." They both chuckled over a remembrance that brought to mind. "The idea I get is that Sejan, and a couple of the others, seemed to think that Human women are..." He stopped, tried to think of a delicate way to put this, and failed "...always randy; and an honorable Vulcan has to be on his guard every minute."

Kris simply howled. "If they only know!"

Grinning, Kirk agreed. "That was the gist of what the Humans were telling them. Something along the lines of, 'wouldn't it be terrific if it were true'." He took a long swallow of his drink. "Of course, there are women who think Vulcans are a challenge and who go out to get one. But that's not what Sejan was thinking."

"Wait till he meets one of those."

"He'll be able to handle it now, I think. Sejan has grown up a lot in the past month. You can have him back now and be glad to get him."

"No, send him up to a starship if you can, Jim. He didn't join Starfleet to be in an office, either yours or mine. If you think he's ready, let's get him a flight assignment."

"Want to put him on Mike's ship?"

"Mike's ship! Does he have one?" Kris's eyes lit up, and Kirk felt himself oddly envious.

"He's getting the Dominion, next week when Ruslan is promoted to commodore. You'd better start looking for quarters in Sector Ten." Kirk turned just then and saw Mike at the door looking for them. He gestured with a glass. "You go tell him, Kris."

She barely heard him, heading across the room to Mike with stars in her eyes. Kirk waited until Mike came back and shook his hand. "Thanks, Jim. Thanks for letting me know. Want to help us celebrate tonight?"

Kirk shook his head. "No, you two go ahead. I have other plans for tonight. Maybe another time." He took his leave, still faintly envious of the two of them happily considering the future.

All things considered, Kirk felt rather pleased with the challenge fate had dropped in his lap. His office was working more smoothly than it had when he arrived, and he had the feeling he was somehow more in control. He had made half a dozen very good assignments to starships, and now had seventeen Vulcans, seven Andorians, a Deltan, and eight Human junior officers working with him. With Sejan's change of status and assignment to Mike's ship, Kirk decided it was time to look around for someone new to move in.

Therefore, it came as rather a surprise to find out that others were not so pleased. The regular staff meeting of Admiral Nogura's command section was nearly over when Nogura made an announcement that rocked Kirk.

"It has come to my attention that lately several of our commanding officers have been taking an active interest in Personnel matters. I would like it clearly understood that this is to be handled on the proper levels. Fleet Deployment is not to be bothered by any similar requests."

"Admiral, I have no objection to such assignments," Kirk said mildly. He didn't want anyone to think he had been complaining.

"Nevertheless, it takes your valuable time away from more important tasks to be attending to routine personnel assignments."

"I have to protest," Bardan put in quickly. "These have hardly been routine matters."

Nogura favored him with a sour stare. "I consider yeoman's assignments, appointments at ratings schools, and starship duty tours as routine. That is the customary scope of Personnel Division, is it not?"

De Acebo put in her two cents' worth. "The assignments were routine, Admiral; the personnel concerned were not. In every case, the young officer involved was having problems with his current duties. If we could help..."

"That is a job for Psychology," Nogura informed her.

"I beg to differ." Kirk shifted uncomfortably in his chair as he interrupted. "By taking an informal approach we were able to prevent its ever needing the attention of Psychology. They could attend to more serious matters, and we did not lose some potentially valuable young people."

Nogura was stopped. Everyone knew he had expressed great concern with the image of Starfleet and the current drop-off in recruitment. Orthodox or not, if what his officers were doing helped retain other officers, he was going to have to accept it. But he did not give up, merely changed his angle of attack. "Since we are discussing this in open session, then I want it clearly understood that we are still to remember regulations in making such assignments. It has been proven that ships function better when the crew is primarily of the same race. You have been sending your officers merely to the first ship available. Lt. Norman is on an Andorian ship, and I see Ensign Sejan is due to be on a Human one. This will not work."

"I was not aware," Kirk said stiffly, "that it was a restrictive regulation. Certainly I agree that assigning ships on the basis of race is a convenience—both for the crew and for Personnel Division. But it is not a requirement." Kirk picked up the stylus in front of him, twirling it between the fingers of one hand. If

protocol had allowed him to stand up and walk around, he would have done so. "Anne Norman, for your information, was brought up on a colony planet with Humans, Andorians, and Saurians. Being on an Andorian ship is not a difficulty for her or them, and it was the only ship with an opening in her field. If we'd waited for a Human ship, who knows how long that would have taken? And Sejan is a different problem. He is very unused to working with non-Vulcans since he did not attend Starfleet Academy. He needs this experience with Humans, as an ensign, if he is ever to function well in Starfleet."

With a slight effort Kirk stopped twirling the stylus and met Nogura's gaze directly. "Are you telling us that Starfleet needs a quota system? One point two ships for Deltans, 3.7 for Andorians, and so on?" It was an argument he had never expected to hear from the admiral.

Admiral Sirik had not yet spoken up, nor had Thargen. Sirik now rose and claimed everybody's attention. "It has long been a concern of the Vulcan Council that race is even considered in applications to Starfleet. We realize that the psychological and medical needs of the different races and species in Starfleet must be considered in assigning duties. But it is not the only consideration. I submit that this is an instance of doing what works, whether it can be explained or not." Everyone stared to hear such an unlikely speech from a Vulcan noted for his attention to detail. "I consider the topic closed."

Nogura rose and faced him, then nodded briefly. "You are correct, Admiral," he said, giving in. "There will be no more discussion as long as your actions continue to be effective." The two left the room separately. Everyone else breathed a sigh of relief.

Kirk rose, wondering if it had been a victory or not. Bardan said quickly, "Don't leave yet, Jim. I've got another one for you."

"Only if you can get Thurlett another assignment. I'm five over strength right now."

"I'll see about it and let you know in the morning."

With a nod, Kirk fled. He did not need any more favors asked just at the moment.

The next morning Kirk took a very good look at his office staff. He had given up thinking of them as a group, knowing only each individual and how each did the work assigned. Now he realized it was a very oddly assorted crew, and he took Nogura's point that things went more smoothly when only one race worked together. But there was another point to consider. In the long run, they were all doing a better job this way.

As Kirk turned his attention from the main office to his own papers. The desk comm signaled an incoming call. His current yeoman, an incorrigibly humorous young Human named Coleman, took the call saying, "Fleet Deployment and Vulcan Day-Care Center." It was his standard opening when feeling full of high spirits. Kirk groaned to himself and turned, just as he heard the caller's reply.

"Young man, you will explain that remark." It was Admiral Sirik, and he was not amused. Coleman met Kirk's eye in agony, and Kirk suppressed a smile. Coleman was just going to have to get himself out of this one.

"I shall see if Admiral Kirk is in, sir," Coleman replied, ignoring the whole sequence. He transferred the call to Kirk's desk and grinned at his admiral.

Kirk went into his office and flipped the switch. "Yes, Admiral. What can I do for you?"

"First, I should like to meet with you this morning if you have a unit of free time. Second, I should like to know the meaning of that odd identification which your yeoman used."

"I shall be pleased to see you at 0945, if that is convenient. And my yeoman will answer your questions then, if you are willing." Coleman was not going to get out of this. His tendency to express humor in unsuitable ways was one reason he had been assigned to Kirk, though he was an excellent yeoman.

"I shall be there." Sirik signed off. There was no idle chitchat with a

Vulcan officer. Kirk smiled and called Coleman into his office.

When Sirik arrived, the yeoman was properly chastened, though Kirk was sure his eyes were still amused. Sirik, however, put an end to that. He was an imposing figure, nearly six feet, four inches tall, thin and angular, and beginning to gray around the temples. He was well over 100 standard years of age and had been in space for eighty of those years. Coleman swallowed and stood up a little straighter.

To Kirk's surprise, Sirik gave him an amused glance before he faced the hapless yeoman. "I believe you did not hear my request earlier, Yeoman. I did not hear your identification on the communicator. Would you repeat what you said?"

"'Fleet Deployment and Vulcan Day-Care Center, sir,'" Coleman repeated. He bit his lip, cheeks flushing.

"Ah, I understand. It was a Human joke, was it not?" Sirik was giving the impression of mild interest, as though confronted by an odd specimen. It effectively ruined any joke, even one in bad taste. "Could you explain your rationale?"

Kirk rubbed his mouth with one hand.

Coleman swallowed uncomfortably. "There are several Vulcan officers working here, and most of them are ensigns. We seem to be taking care of a lot of children."

"Yes, I see. How old are you, Yeoman?"

"Twenty-one, sir."

"Thank you; you are dismissed." Coleman fled, and Sirik turned to Kirk, who let out the laugh he'd been holding in. "Your yeoman seems to have missed the point that you were taking care of him as well," Sirik said mildly.

"Thank you, Admiral. He's one I am having trouble reaching, probably because I have a sense of humor quite like his."

"Indeed." Their eyes met, and Kirk saw amusement in the Vulcan's eyes as well. "I am glad to be of service. Now, Admiral, there are some questions you can answer if you will. I had not been aware of the situation here until yesterday afternoon, though I have made some inquiries since. I have learned that you have seventeen Vulcan officers here who have been sent because they are considered problems. This is of great concern to me. You have far fewer of any other race or species."

Kirk sat down and motioned Sirik to another chair. "That has been a concern to me as well. I will point out that several of them did not attend Starfleet Academy and are not yet accustomed to working with other races. Some of the older ones, who have been sent from what might be considered better assignments, generally have not yet learned tact. Humans learn that from the day they meet another Human as emotional as they. Deltans don't have to learn it; they're born with it. Andorians don't care, but they're usually not a threat to Human commanders in any case. Vulcan young people often do not take care to save face for a superior yet less skilled or intelligent officer."

"I see. Is it not true that these same superior officers could teach the young person tact, as you have done?" Sirik was regarding him thoughtfully.

"Obviously. But it takes a certain confidence in yourself to do that, and Humans tend to be very wary of Vulcan intelligence. It's a negative-feedback response on both sides." Yet it could be such a positive feedback, Kirk knew. The memory of Spock saying, "Are you all right, Captain?" was never far from his mind.

"Then there is little that can be done to prepare young people for these problems?"

Kirk shrugged. "It isn't a very large percentage of new officers who face these problems," he pointed out. "I'm sure your usual orientation sessions for cadets and new ensigns are adequate for most. It's standard to tell them something about the other races they'll be working with. Yet I know myself that the explanation never quite reaches the reality. Without experience, you tend to visualize the other as a most extreme example of a personality type in your own culture, but still with the same motivations."

"Which of course is not true. There is no comparison between what we call an emotion on Vulcan and Human emotions." Sirik became thoughtful. "It is to be regretted that we cannot have more offices which function as yours does, Admiral

Kirk."

Kirk was startled at the Vulcan's calling him by name. It was a sign of respect not common among Vulcans, and it embarrassed him. "It isn't such a big thing. Anyone could do it."

"I do not agree," Sirik said as he rose. "You have an awareness of all beings not common among Humans—a skill few others of any race have. I shall remember that. My niece is attending the Academy at this time. I believe I shall ask that she be assigned to your command when she graduates. Thank you for your time, Admiral Kirk." He left the room as Kirk rose with his own good-byes.

Kirk sat down thoughtfully. It hadn't occurred to him that he was doing anything out of the ordinary. Why did people persist in making such a big deal out of what was merely a conscientious attempt to do his job? He liked young people, and the Vulcans were a special challenge. He admitted that having worked with Spock, he was probably more likely to be able to meet their needs than someone else; but there was no virtue in that. Anything that improved Starfleet, he was going to keep right on doing. This was his life and his home, and everyone had that responsibility for what he valued.

"Admiral? May I speak with you for a moment?"

Kirk looked up to see T'Lur at the door. He smiled. "Yes, please come in. Is there some problem?"

"No problem with my work, sir. However, I have a question."

"Go ahead."

"Is it true that I was assigned to this office because of my difficulties in working with Humans in my previous assignment?"

Kirk thought fast. "I was not aware of any fault on your part, Lieutenant. Merely an inability to recognize the necessity for some of the discipline inherent in Starfleet." He remembered that she had been known to tongue-lash superiors when they made what she considered stupid errors.

"I consider that a fault," she answered stiffly.

Gently Kirk assured her, "No, T'Lur. That is a common problem of growing up—among all species."

"I have been considered an adult since I was seven years old."

"I am aware of Vulcan customs. Yet I also know that Vulcans live 250 standard years. By that comparison, you still have a long way to go. There is no fault in abilities not yet learned at age seven, or even age 27." He paused as she continued to give him an unbelieving stare. "You have made a great deal of progress since I have known you."

"Enough that I might find it easier to work successfully in my own field? I am not pleased to be working on logistics reports, even if they are a necessity for efficient troop movement."

"Do you wish to reenlist after your initial three years?" Kirk countered. "I'd been informed you were considering leaving."

"Not if I can get back to linguistics work, sir."

"In that case, I'll be happy to talk to the xenologist's office for you. With a little luck, I'll get you on a starship." In fact, he already had a ship in mind that needed a junior linguistics officer for a diplomatic mission. He stopped considering and said, "I hope there is nothing else."

T'Lur rose. "Thank you, sir."

Kirk smiled to himself as he finally began to look at the day's work on his desk. She'd be just fine now.

It seemed a day for interruptions. Only a short time later Kirk received a call from another old friend from Academy days, Tim Kaplan.

"Tim, what are you doing here? I thought you were handling surveys in that new sector."

Tim's face broke into a wide grin. "My promotion to captain just came through. I take over the Resolution in three days."

"Congratulations!" Kirk was pleased for his old friend. "I'll buy you a drink

tonight, if you'll let me."

"That's what I'm calling about. Some folks are throwing a party for me and Mike Stevens tonight. Can you get over to the Officer's Club about 1930 hours? There should be quite a few from our class there."

"Couldn't keep me away," Kirk promised.

"Right, see you then." Kaplan's face disappeared. Kirk tried to get a little work done before the next interruption.

Despite his best intentions, Kirk was unavoidably late for the party. When he arrived, between fifty and sixty people were standing in groups, laughing and talking. There were even several children present, including Kris and Mike's three youngsters and Tim's oldest daughter, self-conscious in a new cadet uniform. Tim was trying hard not to look proud of her, but he was not succeeding.

Attempting to shake off a feeling of standing on the outside looking in, Kirk threaded his way through the crowd toward the bar. Just as he reached it, he drew a salute from someone he did not know. Kirk sipped his drink, barely tasting it and feeling older than anyone there. It did not help to know that it was only the effect of the stripes on his uniform. Six years earlier he had been the youngest captain ever to be assigned in Starfleet. Now his contemporaries were just beginning to catch up. Some of his classmates were still commanders, many others taking base instead of starship commands. He had had his chance at a captaincy, and it was over. He should be thrilled at his early promotion to the Admiralty. He was not.

With a slight grimace Kirk took another sip of his drink, then felt a hand on his shoulder.

"There you are," Kris said as she hooked her arm through his. "I was wondering when you'd get here. Anything wrong?"

"No," he responded slowly, "nothing in particular. Maybe just a little envy for Tim, Mike, you. Wishing I were starting out again with a starship command."

"You really did enjoy those years on the Enterprise, didn't you?" Kris asked. "Are you regretting that you left?"

"Yes, I think I am. When I came here, it seemed exciting and new—a challenge that was different. Will Decker's taking the ship seemed like a wonderful idea. Now I can't understand what I thought was so great about it."

"You had command for five years, Jim. That's a long time to live under constant stress. You really needed to get away from it, whether you knew it or not, to rest. Now you're beginning to wake up again; I could see it in the way you took over all those kids and made such a success of it."

Kirk gave her a grateful glance. "Hope you're right."

"I'm sure of it. I think you'll find out soon what it is you want to do next, and there'll be no holding Jim Kirk back. Just don't rush yourself. There's plenty to do in Starfleet, in space. The Admiralty isn't everything."

Kirk nodded. "Agreed. Have you found out what it is you are going to be doing?"

"I've been given an assignment on Starbase Fourteen, where Mike will be coming in on patrol and we can see him. I may even do a little system-shuttling, just to keep my hand in. Come and see us when you get out that way."

"I will, Kris. Good luck."

She reached up and kissed his cheek as Mike came up behind them. "Does that luck extend to me, too?" he asked.

"Sure does, Mike. And to Tim and all the children as well." They shook hands, and then the conversation grew general. The feeling of being an outsider soon disappeared. Starfleet was his life and all the family Kirk needed. He felt at home here, despite the nagging longing for some change in his life. As he spoke with other members of the class, hearing about their jobs and plans, he realized again how lucky he had been to have done so much that he wanted to do.

Yet the wish for change grew stronger. Kirk took a large swallow of his drink and found it bitter.

"Is something wrong, Cadet?" The voice came from directly behind him and made him jump. Kirk turned to look into faded but steady blue eyes.

"Commandant?" he began in a questioning tone. "Commandant Gustafsen?"

"Ja, that's right." The blue eyes were smiling at him.

"I haven't seen you in years, sir." In fact, he had not even thought of the Academy commandant since Gustafsen had retired four or five years earlier. "How are you?"

"I get along, though no longer in Starfleet circles. Yet when Kaplan and Stevens invited me tonight, I wanted to come. Your class was one of my favorites." As Gustafsen sipped his drink, Kirk took a moment to study the man covertly. He was still straight as an arrow, though a great deal thinner and grayer than he once had been. There was little resemblance to a Viking any longer.

"Oh, yes, the first class selected with lower standards of intellectual agility and adaptability. It was supposed to make us less susceptible to the siren call of advanced civilizations. We must have been quite a trial to you, sir."

Gustafsen smiled. "Does knowing that still rankle? Actually, the standards weren't lower, merely different. We took many top minds but also looked more carefully at psychological factors. I've never been dissatisfied with your class, and the officers present tonight confirm my trust in you. You'll have 22 captains by now, 65 first officers, and 93 base commanders of one type or another. And one admiral."

"One admiral." Kirk tried to act as pleased as he knew he should. "It's been a valuable experience."

"Experience for what?" the commandant said. "Experience is for use in the future. What do you want to do in your future, Kirk?"

The question, coming so soon after Kris's remarks, startled him. "I'm doing my job in Starfleet," he replied hesitantly. "That's what I always wanted to do."

"No, what you always wanted was to command a starship. So you did it. Why let them take that away from you?" Gustafsen's curiosity appeared tinged with concern.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. And I've been particularly enjoying my work lately. Have you heard about the upsets I've been causing Personnel Division?" Kirk chuckled a little, trying to ignore the sharp glance Gustafsen gave him for changing the subject to abruptly.

"Tell me about it."

They found seats, and Kirk began a brief explanation of how he had ended up with the Vulcan Day-Care Center and repeated his conversation with Admiral Sirik.

"Sirik. One of my oldest friends, Kirk. We were together on the Kreuzenstern many years ago. Guess he'll never let them put him out to pasture."

"He really understood what I was trying to do with those kids," Kirk told Gustafsen, "and now I think I understand a little better some of what you were trying to do with us at the Academy."

Gustafsen's eyes grew brighter. "Do you remember the time I had to put you on report for arguing with Lt. Ito?"

Laughing, Kirk said, "Yes, that was quite an argument—with both of you. I thought you were pushing us too hard, demanding things we were not ready for. At the same time, I thought you weren't allowing us enough individual choice and responsibility."

"And you learned that everyone in Starfleet should be expected to act like an officer, accepting as well as giving leadership. That's one reason why I was so pleased with your argument. You were the first one to get that point."

"That was only the beginning," Kirk replied. "During my years at the Academy, I had to relearn that lesson many times. Starfleet isn't static. There are constant changes—of people, of missions, of ships. But the general purpose was always the same: to grow and expand the limits of understanding, for all races as well as each individual. It's what I believe in."

"And now you're teaching it to a younger generation."

"Yes, but they've taught me something too. Something you tried to get across but which it has taken me a long time to understand. No one can do it alone. We

need help and understanding to realize that personal growth and desires are nothing unless we look forward to the future for all life. To be a Starfleet officer means accepting responsibility for yourself and your duties so that the purpose of Starfleet is met. Without an understanding of that need to serve others, Starfleet becomes an impersonal business—one which I might eventually have left. Many of my young charges were almost lost for that same reason. It was your guidance that started me toward comprehending that. Alone, I might never have come to the realization." He looked up and met the older man's eyes. "Thank you, sir."

"My pleasure, James Kirk." They raised their glasses to one another. Only then did Kirk notice that someone had begun to play at the music keyboard, and the rest of the group had gathered around. The strains of the Academy anthem drifted across the room. Gustafsen crossed the room to the others, but Kirk found he could not join that crowd. Instead he set down his drink and sought out the balcony far to one side. It was dark, stars gleaming above the ocean. Eventually Gustafsen's question returned to his mind. Why let them take that away from you.

It was a question Kirk could not answer in full. Part of it was that life on the Enterprise had seemed too predictable, and he was looking for a new challenge. It was his own fault that he had not found it by now at the Admiralty. Part of the answer also lay in not fully understanding what he had given up by leaving his starship. He had thought the sections of Starfleet more interchangeable than they were. Now he had to depend on substitutes for things he had once cared most about; sending new ensigns and techs on their own adventures instead of going himself, training young Vulcans instead of having the friendship of the one Vulcan no longer working beside him, the prestige of an admiral instead of the satisfying action of a starship captain.

Yet Kris was right too. He had needed rest and was not quite ready for the next opportunity to arise. Now that he could see his own place clearly once more, he realized that he needed to continue there awhile before looking for a new place to try his wings.

Jim Kirk looked up at the stars, the space lanes where he had once traveled as freely as he could not walk back to his apartment. He would be back up there someday. When he was ready, he would make his own future once again. Out to pasture? Not likely. Jim Kirk was merely between races.

## Spock Experiments

First officer Spock came into the Science Storage area of the Starship Enterprise with a clipboard of items to be checked. He did not expect to see anyone there, but a small, vaguely feminine figure in an ensign's uniform was standing before the shelves. She jumped and turned guiltily as he asked, "Is there something

I can do for you, Ensign?"

"No, sir. I was assigned to bring a left-handed Ellsion framistantor down to Engineering."

"There is no such thing," he assured her.

"Yes, I know that now," she said, so earnestly that Spock realized who she must be: Teri Prohaska, newest ensign in Supply Section and lowest ranking member of the crew.

"Then...?"

"I thought I could make one up, at least good enough to satisfy Lieutenant Kosnecki."

Spock rubbed his chin and thought. Unbidden, a little imp of mischief rose in his breast. It had been a long time, certainly longer than the three years he had spent on Vulcan since that particular imp had bothered him. It was time to give the imp something to do. Spock sat down at the inventory console.

Keying the engineering records to display, Spock watched as line drawings of spare parts flashed past. He was aware of the ensign staring over his shoulder as his fingers chose the numbers of three particular drawings and let the others fade out. With a little manipulation, the three parts merged into a fairly satisfactory framistantor.

"Well, Prohaska, what do you think?" he asked.

"Is this a framistantor?" she asked with interest. "I thought they were a fake."

Spock gave her a severe look. "That is an experimental model." For a moment her eyes were blank, then he could see the light dawn in them. "As you can see," he continued, "it is a dual mode, neither right nor left handed. More efficient."

Prohaska choked trying not to laugh. Spock continued to look at her with the same questioning expression. "Shall I bring the parts to make it up, sir?" she asked.

This was the sort of ensign Spock thoroughly approved of: cooperative and unquestioning. In a few moments she had found the necessary parts and was helping him create the fake device. "Ensign, you may tell Mr. Kosnecki that I shall require a full report on this model, in use," he said as he handed the final result to her. "What are the advantages or disadvantages over the conventional model, and any recommendations." He stopped, thought a moment, and added, "I shall require the Chief Engineer's signature on the report. Be sure he is aware of that." Prohaska did not answer. She was turning the device over in her hands with curiosity. Spock felt an odd kinship with this graceless child who didn't even seem to be aware she should be in awe of him. "Do I have your attention, Ensign?"

She looked up, grinning. "Yes, sir. Give this to Mr. Kosnecki, and tell him he has to write a report on it. And thank you, sir." Prohaska turned and almost skipped out of the room. Spock picked up his clipboard and continued his original task. He had now only to wait and see if the kleentor came into his net. Or as Dr. McCoy might put it, which sucker took the bait.

He did not have long to wait. Two mornings later he came into the science lab to make notes on an experiment and found the device sitting on his desk with a lengthy report attached. The device no longer looked exactly as he had made it. One of the original parts had been replaced by a smaller one, and there were some adaptations in the channeling of the main body. Very interesting. The entire item was streamlined and compact. Spock took up the report and checked through quickly. It bore all the earmarks of Mr. Scott having taken a hand. Spock reviewed the section on recommendations and noticed that somebody thought the device might be useful in Communications, where more framistantors were employed. Spock reached for the intercom and asked Prohaska to come to his office.

She arrived with a smile, not quaking with fear as most other ensigns might have. He held up the device. "Do you know anything about this?" he asked her. "No, sir." She reached out her hand to take it. "But they must have stayed up all night getting that report to you." She looked at it and asked, "It's different, isn't it?"

"Indeed. There is a recommendation that Communications might find this more useful than Engineering. Will you take this to Lieutenant Uhura and ask for her consideration? With my compliments."

"Yes, sir!"

Two days later the device was back again, this time with an even longer report. Uhura's recommendation was that Biology might be able to use it better. Prohaska took it down to the bio lab, where in the course of events it ended up on Doctor McCoy's desk. Spock knew where it was, and Prohaska was able to report to him twice that it was still there. Then it disappeared. Neither of them knew what had happened to it, and no one was telling them. Spock gave a mental shrug and decided that someone without a sense of humor had been a recipient. The parts, not totally changed from the original, would be back in storage. He put it out of his mind.

Then he saw the framistantor again: sitting on the conference room table. Only his well-practiced technique of outward control saved him from starting visibly when he saw it there. As he was still alone in the room, being early for the briefing, he went over to Captain Kirk's place and picked up the device.

"Well, Spock, what do you have there?" Kirk's voice came from the doorway.

"It appears to be some sort of experimental valve." Spock picked up the report while Kirk curiously examined the framistantor. The report had grown by several thousand words. There seemed to be a recommendation attached by every major and several minor departments on the ship. Spock admired everyone's ingenuity.

"But where did it come from?" Kirk asked. He appeared to be truly puzzled, and Spock decided the Captain must be the only one of the ship who did not know of it.

"That is a very good question," he answered evasively. Kirk gave him a sharp look, but the questions were interrupted by the arrival of several other officers.

The meeting began with questions about the engine problems with the warp drive. Still not in balance, the engines were showing a great deal of fluctuation in the proper force levels. All during the session the framistantor sat unobtrusively in front of Kirk and drew everyone's attention. It was clear to Spock, and to Kirk, too, he was sure, that each officer present knew what it was and was waiting to see what would happen.

They reached the end of Kirk's agenda, and no one made the customary move toward leaving the room. Reluctantly Spock drew attention to himself, asking "Will that be all, sir?"

"No," Kirk said and reached for the device. "I would like to know the meaning of this."

No one spoke, and repressed grins were obvious to anyone who chose to look. Spock decided McCoy must have been the one to leave the device, just to see what would happen. Kirk glared at everyone and picked up the report. He did not look at the end of 25,000 words to see who had worked with the thing last. He looked at the beginning to see who had initiated the project. Turning, his eyes met Spock's with total astonishment. Spock shrugged an eyebrow and fought down the imp.

"Mr. Spock, do you have an explanation?"

"Mr. Kosnecki requested a left-handed Ellsion framistantor, sir. I endeavored to see that he received what was required." There was a snort across the room, as someone repressed the giggles. Kirk turned and glared at the culprit. "The device was not adequate, and we have been experimenting with increasing its efficiency," Spock added helpfully.

"It seems to have made the rounds of the entire ship," Kirk said in wonder. He looked at the grinning faces of the officers and finally relaxed. "All right, you've had your little joke. Now, let's get back to work." He handed the device to Scott. "And maybe you can figure out some way to use this. I wouldn't want to waste all that creative thinking."

"Aye, sir. That I will." Scott chuckled as the officers rose to leave.

"Spock, will you wait a moment?"

Spock turned back to Kirk curiously. "Is there something more, Captain?"

"Aren't you going to tell me why you started this foolishness going around here? I thought we had enough to do with these engine problems."

Spock thought Kirk may have changed more than he realized, if he had to have a joke explained to him. All right, then, he'll get a good explanation.

"We have not been back aboard the Enterprise for very long, and it was my belief that the human crew has been very stiff and uncomfortable with the changes, the new areas, the new crew. I knew that the jokes would begin when the humans felt comfortable with their surroundings. It seemed logical to give this a small incentive. In the interests of crew morale, of course."

"In other words, you made a totally rational and logical decision to play a practical joke on the entire crew." Kirk eyes widened in disbelief.

"Exactly."

"You know, Spock, I think I've been working too hard. that is starting to make sense to me." Their eyes met in mutual amusement. Then he picked up the report, grinning over the first words. "I think I'll enjoy reading this."

"I shall be pleased to answer any further questions," Spock said as he once more headed for the door. Would Kirk have believed him if Spock had said he started the whole thing just to get the captain's sense of humor back in working order? Spock doubted it. For now it was simply enough to know that things were back to normal, and others would be taking over the practical jokes. Experiment resolved satisfactorily, Spock went back to work.



from: Starship Enterprise  
Somewhere "thataway"  
Stardate 7418.6

Dear Tessira,

As you can see from the heading, I've made it! I'm actually aboard the Enterprise. After all these months of scheming to get here, it came about in the most ordinary way. You aren't going to believe it.

First, you know what a galactic pain it has been in San Francisco trying to get that ship refitted. Everyone, and I do mean everyone, has his/her own idea of what that ship needs. Never mind if it is on the standard allotment list or can be specially requisitioned or not. They want it, and they want it yesterday. Lieutenant Commander Uhura is always very nice about it, but she never backs down. And Commander Scott. Well, that man is probably an Irishman in disguise, the way he can blarney Lt. Olzinski out of her 29 years as the meanest Supply Chief in Starfleet. She'd get him anything. The rest of us go all weak in the knees when Captain Decker comes down to earth—the gods descending—and smiles that parsec wide smile of his and says "pretty please."

Anyway, you know I'd have given every hour of accumulated leave for the next ten years to join the Enterprise, and of course I've always been considered too new and inexperienced for starship duty. But when that cloud menace arrived here last week, it was my lucky day. By now you've seen tapes of Vejur "patterning" Epsilon 9, so you know how it shook us up here watching that. Well, a lot of people panicked aboard ship, too, and 31 of them had to be replaced.

Now, why they needed an assistant to the assistant supply chief, I'll never know. But Lt. Olzinski came into my humble supply closet and told me to close up shop and get up there in 20 minutes. She'd have someone clean my quarters and send up anything I'd need if there was time.

So I moved. I grabbed a spare uniform and a toothbrush and made it to the transporter room with two minutes to spare. It was crowded when I got there, four crew on the platform and one civilian arguing with the transporter tech. He (the civilian) took one look at me and hauled me up to the platform. "Send her," he said. "I'm not getting my atoms scrambled again even for blue menaces, and you can tell Kirk that, too." So the tech pushed the buttons in a hurry, and the Enterprise appeared around us so fast I got dizzy. As we were getting off the platform, Admiral Kirk hurried into the room. We all did our very best grovel, and my voice squeaked as I ask permission to come abroad; but he didn't even see us. He was arguing via the com. with that civilian, who turned out to be Dr. McCoy. You must know all about him - there can't be anyone in Supply who doesn't have a favorite story about the weird things he has requested from time to time, like the time he wanted all that concrete, or the time he requisitioned 95 gallons of chicken soup and noodles.

The ensign next to me had to pull me out into the hall while I was gaping in wonder, but then someone from Supply claimed me and put me to work at the go-fer routine. Good thing I had spent time dreaming about the Enterprise, because I had a pretty good idea where everything was. It all looked different than any starship I've studied, but most everything still seemed to be in the same places. Just enough difference to be thoroughly confusing at times. I've spent a lot of time talking to the computer trying to get it all figured out since, but at this point I just asked questions. Or punted.

We were all busy idiots, trying to get twenty hours (minimum) of work done in the twelve hours that Kirk had demanded, and somehow we managed to get done enough to pull out on schedule. It was at this point I realized I had never seen the Enterprise in my entire life, and that if I were going to, I'd better get to a monitor before we broke communications with the drydock. A lot of people must have had the same idea, because the large viewscreen in the rec deck was patched in to the drydock monitor, and we got to see ourselves move out. It was GLORIOUS. She looked so shiny and new and white, and I think we all forgot we were probably going to be dead in about three or four days. There was a lot of cheering.

However, while we were cheering, those poor souls in Engineering were trying to get the matter-antimatter intermix balanced without a Vulcan science officer. (Commander Sonak having died in the transporter accident. Ugh.) Engineers I've talked to since say they'll have nightmares for the rest of their lives about that wormhole effect. I know it looked pretty terrible from my angle. I was going to Sickbay with a carton of substitute blood that had got in with galley supplies when we began to accelerate to warp drive. Kirk had the bridge intercom on so we could all hear - the man is very considerate of his crew - and a few people were getting nervous, Me, I was too dumb to know I should be nervous. So I thought I was crazy when I started seeing double and voices got weird, until it penetrated that everyone on the bridge was panicked too. I didn't even realize we almost got creamed by an asteroid as well, thank goodness, or I'd be a permanent fixture in Sickbay now. Ignorance can be bliss, on occasion.

Things got pretty tense after that, but by now everyone was at emergency stations; so no one was giving us in supply anything to do, and Lt. Faissal had plenty of time to figure out who I was. (You know, a person more unlike Olzinski I can hardly imagine, except for the voice. Do you suppose Supply Chiefs are issued the voice along with the job?) So, he had me doing all the diddlyshit errands there

hadn't been time to see to earlier - I guess he had faith we'd live until next week at least. And I ended up lost half the time and didn't know where I was until once later that day, I was coming down a passage near turbolift 8 (I think) and met a vision.

I mean it. There was this Vulcan, out of uniform, striding down the corridor, his long black sleeves billowing out behind him. Absolutely incredible. I stopped dead still, and my jaw dropped. If Kirk and Decker are the gods descending, this was Pluto straight from Hades. At first he didn't see me and entered the turbolift; then as he turned he saw me, and raised an eyebrow as if asking if I were waiting for the lift. I was, but I couldn't say so. I couldn't say anything. So the door slid shut, and he disappeared.

You know now, naturally, that it was Spock back again, and from then on the ship seemed to settle down, sort of knowing Kirk and Spock together could solve anything. I have no idea everything that happened. After awhile, those of us not on emergency stations were told to say out of the way, so we congregated in people's cabins and watched the viewscreens. It was almost like some sort of fanciful entertainment. I mean, a bright blue power field 82 AU's big is hardly the sort of thing you meet more than once in your life. Several people freaked out when we actually were drawn into Vejur, but most of us were glued to the screens in awe. A couple of people even saw Spock when he left the ship in a thruster suit (and if you think that ensign didn't catch hell, you don't know supply chiefs), but in our cabin we were having a heated debate over what those golden swarms surrounding us were. By the time Kirk went out after Spock, though, we were all watching and saw Spock come hurtling back, as if Vejur had tossed him back at us.

That may have been the first moment any of us got really scared. If a Vulcan couldn't contact Vejur, what hope did the rest of us have? Then everything started to go so fast, it all became unreal again. Eventually Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Decker, and the Ilia-probe took one of the access lifts to the outer surface and walked into Vejur.

You don't have to read that again - they walked wearing nothing more unusual than those new jackets (you know, the ones with pockets.) We could see them until they disappeared into a depression, and after that nothing until 20-30 minutes later this most incredible light began to show and grow into a pillar effect, all sorts of colors streaming up from the depression. Then Kirk and Spock and McCoy came running up out of there, and back across the weird tile-like area to the ship. They almost didn't make it before Vejur disappeared.

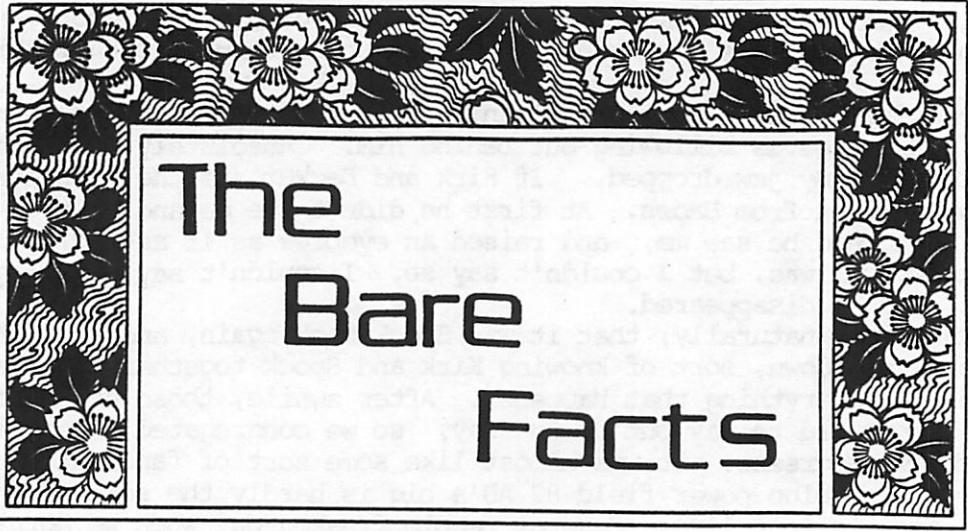
Now I know you are going to ask where Vejur went. It's a good question. I wish I knew. It was all over, the ship was in earth orbit, and everyone started running into the corridors, laughing and crying. The most incredible hoard of Saurian Brandy appeared. Of course, we all thought we'd be in orbit for a week or two, while we finished up the details that were undone. But the next thing we knew, Uhura was announcing which duty watch was on, and that we were heading out again.

It was like nothing had happened. Faissal had all of us in Supply doing an inventory to see what was what and where it was. McCoy came in for a large supply of glass bottles and copper tubing. Kirk and Spock had to have full sets of uniforms and stuff issued - can you believe they both arrived with nothing more than their own clothes, just the way I did?

So here we are, heading no one knows where and sort of on the lam from Admiral Nogura. Half of us think he'll pin a medal on Kirk when we get back, the rest think there will be an explosion to match the one that didn't happen when Vejur decided to be nice and go into the fourth dimension or whatever. And you know what? I don't care. I could stay on the Enterprise very nicely, thank you, for the rest of my life. So far it is exactly what I hoped it would be, and I don't plan to stay assistant to the assistant supply chief all my life.

As the Vulcans say, Live Long and Prosper.

Love,  
Teri



# The Bare Facts

from: Starship Enterprise  
Earth Orbit  
Stardate 7425.9

Ensign Tessira n'ha Melora  
Starship Lexington  
Sector IV Quadrant D

Dear Tess,

As you are no doubt surprised to see, we are once again in Earth Orbit. Those of us who were betting on Kirk and the Enterprise being on the lam from Admiral Nogura (as I mentioned last time) have been proven right. We were very unceremoniously yanked back here "to explain" ourselves, if you please. Humph. Somebody ought to explain to the distinguished admiral that even he should try a little diplomacy once in a while.

We began our shakedown cruise with high hopes - me especially since I'd managed to get myself assigned, after all the confusion, to the Quartermaster section. Thinking all was well, those of us in Supply were only concerned with getting everyone off our backs. One afternoon I was working in Engineering, and Budon Kosnecki sent me off to find a left-handed Ellison framistantor. Just as I went out the door I heard Ro Nickoll say, "Buc, that's not fair. She thinks..." So I figured out all by myself that there's no such thing. Aren't you proud of me? I played along with the gag for awhile until someone said I'd have to talk to Mr. Scott about it. Not on your life! Instead I went into the Science Storage area to see if I could come up with a substitute. And while I was there, Mr. Spock came in.

I had to explain, of course - Spock always has to know everything. He gave me a very thoughtful look, then sat down at the inventory control console and started punching up line drawings of spare parts. Finally he said, "Well, Prohaska, what do you think?" I looked over his shoulder and saw a pretty authentic looking gadget. "Is that a framistantor?" I asked. "I thought they were fake."

"That," he said severely, "is an experimental model." Now I could see that he had taken some of those part drawings and stuck them together. "As you can see, it is a dual mode, neither right nor left handed. More efficient."

I nearly cracked up, but he was looking at me with such a poker face that I swallowed it and asked, "What parts shall I bring you, sir?" In a few minutes he had it together. "Who did you say asked for this?" (I hadn't said.) "Mr. Kosnecki, sir." He made a note to himself. "Ensign, you may tell Mr. Kosnecki I shall require a follow-up report on this experimental model in use. If it is successful, what are

its specific advantages or disadvantages over the original. If it is not usable, it will be necessary to make a detailed report of its shortcomings." And I'll swear his eyes were twinkling as he added, "I shall require the Chief Engineer's signature on the report. Be sure he is aware of that."

You should have seen Kosnecki's face when I gave him the framistantor and Mr. Spock's orders. And it was all I could do to keep from laughing while the rest of those idiots in Engineering were chortling and snickering behind our backs. I don't know the full story yet, but I heard that this morning Mr. Spock found the framistantor back on his lab desk with a 15,000 page report. I'll keep you informed.

Unfortunately, at the same time I seem to have made what will have to be considered the major blunder of an already outstanding career. Mr. Spock sent down orders for a pair of chess sets to be delivered, one to his cabin and one to the Captain's. So far so good. I located where the sets were stored feeling very pleased with myself - it only took me 25 minutes to figure out how they were cued into the computer inventory. (I'm learning, I'm learning! Honest.) And I went up to the officers' deck with only a minimum of trepidation, figuring that everyone was surely on duty. I dropped off Spock's set quickly and intended to do the same with Kirk's. But when I went into the conference room I saw he had left his screen on. It was showing space directly ahead, as clearly as if I'd been standing on the leading edge of the saucer. I stared at it until I heard a voice in the room behind me. I almost died. Kirk had apparently come in and here I was in his quarters, mooning at the stars like a greenhorn. I mumbled something apologetic and started to set up the chess set. Don't ask me why; I was a little unglued and it seemed the logical thing to do.

Kirk stepped up beside me and picked up a piece, and by then I had worked up the courage to face him, so I turned towards him. He had nothing on but a towel! He'd been in the shower, and idiot that I am, I hadn't heard it. I must have gone beet red because he started to grin at me. And I made it worse. Along with the set, I had brought up some uniforms and had set them on a chair. Seeing him like that, all I could think of was those damn uniforms, and I handed him one. (Stop laughing and read on.)

Kirk was grinning still. He said - and I'll never forget this in a million years - "You seem to think I could use a uniform at the moment."

And that's when I did it. I said, "Actually sir, I was wishing for the first time that Starfleet issued smaller towels."

His eyebrows rose in astonishment, and I practically ran out of there saying something about getting back on duty. What I really wanted was to find a hole somewhere and die. Unfortunately, I was immediately captured by one of those troublemakers in the galley - Petra Nimmagadda I think it was. She had a complaint, as usual. Somehow or other, out it all came. I spilled the whole story. The next thing I knew, the entire galley crew was lined up to hear Petra's version, and she made it sound a whole lot worse than it really was. Within an hour it was all over the ship. Even all the Senior Officers knew. I will not tell you what Doctor McCoy said, as no one else heard it and I will not add fuel to my own fire.

My life since has been a disaster. I find towels draped on my desk every morning; teeny pieces of toweling turn up in odd places with little notes attached - "Here, try this one for size." Even Spock found time to tease me - at least I think he was teasing. He asked me specially to bring some hand towels to his quarters, since "you seem to be in charge of towels for this mission."

I have to fight back. Got any ideas? I've been thinking about confiscating all the towels on the ship and issuing bed sheets, but I think they'd find out it was me. And I'd probably end up with everyone coming down to my cabin for towels any time of the day or night, finding nude men at my door. Hmmm. On second thought....

Well, all this happened about ten days ago. Pretty soon after that Nogura yanked us home but it's taken us sometime to get there. You would not believe the troubles we've been having in Engineering. The engineers have been complaining

about the new engines and walking around with low faces and as crabby as a whole net of power cats; they set off sparks wherever they were. Most of us just tried to ignore them or stay out of the way. Then we had that big accident and lost warp drive. Nogura did not even believe it and sent another ship out to check on us. You can imagine how indignant we were about that.

I guess I'll have to save the rest for next time, as we haven't quite reached the end of the story. We finally did make it back to Earth and are trying to get things sorted out. Kirk has been before a Board of Inquiry about taking off into the unknown and another Board is scheduled to meet about the accident; there is some question about faulty equipment been supplied and corruption in high places. Admiral Lucko is madder than the aforementioned power cats and somebody is due to get the shaft. I hope. Then maybe we can get out of here and get to work. I did not fight tooth and nail to get aboard a Starship just to spend years getting old in Earth orbit.

Take it easy, and if you have any ideas concerning towels, let me know. Know where I can get some purple towels with green dots on them, real cheap? Maybe I'll issue them to my worst tormentors. Put all your furtive little imaginations to work and see what you can come up with.

Love,  
Teri



## The Wager

Ensign Tessira n'ha Melora  
Starship Lexington  
Sector IV Quadrant D

Dear Tess,

Here we are again, once more trying to start out on our maiden voyage. As usual, Captain Kirk has come up trumps, solving the difficulties with a wave of his magic wand. I swear, I have no idea how he does these things. Anybody else in his position would have ended up grounded for life. He managed to avoid a Board of Inquiry, has been handed back the Enterprise for another mission, and was commended for all the alterations to the phaser system. The Great Bird of the Galaxy is certainly on our side.

Even I seem to be benefiting from the general good luck. Remember I told you about the little invention Mr. Spock and I worked up — the dual mode Ellison framistantor — as a joke on Buc Kosnecki. Spock decided that he needed full reports from all the ship's sections on this great breakthrough in engineering design; there's a devious turn of that man's mind that is awe-inspiring. Every

Back on course!!!  
Stardate 7437.6

little while I'd get called back to his office to deliver the darn thing to somebody else, "with Mister Spock's compliments." Even our major accident only slowed things up a little. The funny thing was, everybody on the ship started to enjoy seeing that silly piece of machinery turn up somewhere new. There were even bets on it in Security, though no one in Engineering dared mention it or Buc would have fed them through the nearest fuel intake valve. I knew where it was all the way till it hit Medical, and then I lost it. Mr. Spock asked me about it at the same time, so I guess he lost it, too. We didn't see it for a while, and I couldn't find out anything from anyone. Whoever had it wasn't talking.

I know now that it was Dr. McCoy who was holding it for a Grand Finale. While all this was going on, the captain and his assorted engineers had been meeting almost continually to get the warp drive settled down properly. It wouldn't settle. One day Ro Nickoll and I stood quaking in the Engineering supply room, listening to them all hollering at each other and wondering if we'd ever get back to Earth (which we did, obviously).

Anyway, one afternoon they got to the briefing room, and there was the darn thing sitting innocently on the middle of the table. I'll bet if Spock thought he'd have the time, he'd have hidden the thing; but Kirk walked in and they all had to face it out. Of course, everyone in the room knew what it was, but incredibly, it seems that Kirk had not yet seen it. In fact, he was even kind of irritated that his officers were wasting "valuable time" on it. But Spock kind of jollied him up with his "innocent-little-Vulcan" routine (I wish you could see him do that; it's priceless) and he ended up seeing it for what it was — Spock's logical attempt to improve ship's morale.

I can hear you laughing all the way over here. Honest, that's what Mr. Spock told me later.

Eventually Kirk told Scotty to see that all that creative energy was put to some good use, and Scotty, knowing where to drop all the blame, gave the thing back to Buc!!! I wish I could have seen that. Now, I'm not sure where it went next, but the rumor is that Buc and Dr. McCoy have put it on the Medical Department still. I know that the good doctor is going around telling everyone how well it works, and he's going to recommend it to all his friends. (We all know about medicinal alcohol.) We'll probably end up patenting the idiot device and making Starfleet a pile of credits from all the real alcohol manufacturers. See what I mean about Kirk always coming up trumps? Who do you suppose will get all the credit — the man who didn't even see it till it was nearly over, that's who!

The really good part of all this, as far as I'm concerned, is that Mr. Spock has decided to put me in as a regular assistant in the science labs. I've got full charge of all equipment, checking things in and out, keeping up the inventory, etc. It's wonderful. I'm out of Faissal's sight a good part of the day, I don't ever go to Engineering or the galley, and I'm learning a lot about science. In addition — joy of joys — I am no longer the greenest, youngest ensign on the whole ship. When we got back, we got in two kids who just walked out of the Academy with their commissions in their hot little hands. They have the fun of spending triple shifts in the lab until Spock considers them qualified to work on their own — and sometimes I even get to supervise. Frankly, I'd rather wash test tubes and beakers forever, but those kids seem to thrive on the hard work.

Petra Nimmagadda just came by (I'm in the rec room) and reminded me I have to apologize. She was not the one who got me in the hot-water by spreading the story about me seeing the captain wearing only a towel. That was Sue-Lyn Anewinter. She still thinks it's screamingly funny and broadcasts the story every chance she gets. Lord, I don't know what she expected. Kirk really looks just like anybody else in a towel, only better. He doesn't have stars or braid tattooed on him, or a heart with "I am the Captain" written in fancy script. Maybe she's just jealous, or as sorry as I was that there was a towel at all.

Whatever the reason, Sue-Lyn has been proving a real cross to bear. Last week at a bag session I was complaining about her, saying I couldn't figure out how such a lamebrain pain-in-the-butt could have gotten on board any ship. Petra said

casually that Kirk had pulled Sue-Lyn out of a security detail after he found out she could cook. Several others told me then that Kirk was always doing that; several people had been given duty on this ship because of Kirk's intervention. There were a lot of reasons: some had worked with him at Headquarters, some had been assigned to specialties he needed, but nearly everyone had been mismatched with their job. Kirk had found out about it, gotten the assignment changed, and then wangled getting them onto the Enterprise. Ro said she thought about 25% of the crew had been put here that way. That made me curious enough to dig out my own file and see if that threw any light. Sho 'nuff did.

Take my word for it. Never read all the junk they put in your file. It's very depressing to see exactly what your superiors really thought of those foulups at the Academy. It was also crushing to see that seven (count 'em) commanders of one type or another had rejected me being put in their departments. I guess that explains how my name got put in front of Kirk, since I am certainly not a quartermaster's dream. He actually did ask for me. That man must see some kind of potential in me, though I can't imagine what it could be. As of right now, I join the rest of the crew in my fervent support of our captain.

Of course, it would help if he could keep my name straight. It seems that there's this Kerry Prochaska, lieutenant, Science Section. Every once in a while, just when I'm sure it will never happen again, our duty calls get mixed. Most of the time, since we're both in Science now, we don't dare ignore the calls, but one way or the other I usually end up getting chewed out. And supply chiefs have nothing on the way Mr. Spock can elegantly chew a person to tiny pieces. Kirk thinks there's only one of us, a Larry Proshaska (I said he picked me, I didn't say he knew who I was). One of these days the non-existent Larry is going to be due for a session on the carpet — I mean, there are a lot of calls. Which means Kerry and I will have to show up if Uhura can't find the culprit (It's her system, after all) and nail him first. I think it's Buc, getting back for the framistantor, but I can't prove it. I wonder if I asked Mr. Spock....

You're probably asking yourself how this ship can possibly have the highest efficiency rating in our division. Frankly, kid, I haven't the foggiest notion. Yet, it seems to me that I've never worked so hard in my life. Lots of people told me that space travel is boring between missions, but nothing is further from the truth. The whole time I'm on duty, I'm running about doing something for someone so that they can do their jobs. When I'm off-duty I'm at a Sing Gather or inventing a framistantor. There's even a group of us klutzies that Kirk picked for duty that meet weekly — a sort of support group. Even though I've heard that one can get very tired of seeing the same old faces every day, I don't find it true. Slowly we are sort of becoming family — even Buc and Sue-Lyn, who qualify as the family pests. You love each other for faults as well as virtues, and I wouldn't change them for anything (well, almost anything).

The Enterprise is a beautiful ship, and our new mission promises to be filled with excitement. I know my job isn't very glamorous; but I love being on this ship every minute. And I understand why Captain Kirk moved heaven, Earth, and Admiral Nogura to get his command back. No matter where we go from here, it's worth everything it took to get me here. Even the seven rejections.

So, with any luck at all I have five years ahead on the Enterprise. Things are going pretty well so far, and maybe I will be Chief of Supply before I leave. Shall we make a bet? First one as Supply Chief rates a dinner from the other? I'd like mine on Argelius, if you please.

Got to run — I'm getting a duty call, or rather "Larry" is. Wonder what this is going to mean. Let you know when I can.

Love,  
Teri

# Aftermath

from: Starship Enterprise  
Earthbound course  
Stardate 8142.3

Supply Officer Tessira n'ha Melora  
Starship Endeavor  
Quadrant G Sector XII

Dear Tess,

Well, kid, it seems that I've won our bet. I'm Chief of Supply for the Enterprise. Next time we're both on Argelius, you owe me the biggest dinner you can imagine. I'm not letting you off lightly. Of course, you thought I'd never manage it, didn't you! I'm first to admit my ambition and drive are rather on the weak side, but I realized when I first came on board that there were other, more important qualities. Despite my five years as quartermaster's slave under Captain Kirk, I might still be only a specialist instead of a chief if I hadn't hooked my star up to Mr. Spock's. Getting that special assignment the first year as a science supply tech got me going in the right direction, and here I am.

Exactly where am I? Well, three years ago when the Enterprise finished the five year mission, we started doing training missions instead. That was when Captain Kirk went back to the admiralty and Mr. Spock took over as captain. He's always said — many times in my hearing — that he didn't want command, but Kirk outfoxed him by putting him in as Training Commander. Most of the other senior officers took on other assignments, though Mr. Scott stayed on as Chief Engineer. Since Faissal and I were willing to stay on, he went up to Supply Chief and I got to be Supply Officer. There were only the two of us, since training crews are smaller than normal, and Faissal soon grew to hate the job. He hated having to tell the kids things more than once, couldn't handle them not knowing where things were, and griped through all the necessary explanations it took before they finally got his point. Two months ago he finally caved in and asked for a transfer to a full line ship. I braced myself for a new superior — it's been work to get Faissal trained and I didn't look forward to starting over — but instead, Captain Spock asked me if I thought I could handle the full job. Of course, I'm not a lieutenant commander yet, but that kind of thing doesn't bother him. He wanted someone he could trust with the trainees, and he asked me.

If I thought he needed it, I'd cut myself up into little pieces for Spock. I promised I'd work as hard as I could with the new trainees, and remembering all the trouble I had my first week, I had a few ideas of what to do. The new kids arrived, we got settled in, and things began to run smoothly. You wouldn't think it would. We had a small group of cadets on their absolute first space missions, some

graduating cadets who were due to be ensigns, and a couple of command class lieutenants getting ready to take over more responsible assignments. Lt. Saavik, a Vulcan, was student commander. I kept an eye on her since she's not much younger than I; remarkable girl.

Do you remember the cruise we went on, with Captain Rondeau of the Hood? Unmitigated disaster, I've always thought. Spock had this cruise beautifully orchestrated — everyone in the proper places at the proper times, well-thought-out assignments, you name it. Everything went beautifully until we started on the final cruise. By now Admiral Kirk was aboard, and the rumor was going around that this would be the final training mission. Afterward, Enterprise was due to return to fully operational status. So most of the ensigns and lieutenants were up for berths on this ship and very nervous about it. Having the admiral and his staff aboard made everyone else nervous — particularly on the bridge where the older officers were supervising. Even my few supply trainees were jittery, though Lord knows why. Admiral Kirk never got a chance to run his white gloves across the costume fabricator.

And now begins the tale. We had hardly been out at all, barely out of the Solar System, when Kirk got a personal call from Carol Marcus at Regula Spacelab, asking for help. I don't know why — and never got a chance to ask Spock — but the next thing I knew Kirk had taken over command, and we were scooting off towards Regulus as fast as those engines could scoot. It seemed kind of exciting, a break in the routine which I needed after three years stuck in training.

Then Khan attacked. You've seen the reports on that by now, I'm sure. We were running with shields down and almost were destroyed on the spot. The kids, trainees of all ages, initially collapsed under the pressure. It's one thing to go into battle fully psyched up. It's another to have the rug pulled out from under you totally unawares. Engineering took the worst of it, and some kids died. Scotty's nephew, Peter, one of the new midshipmen, was one of those. It takes a lot to scare me after eight years in space, but I had my hands full trying to keep my kids from panicking so we could help out as needed. I'm not sure if I got any sleep for three or four days — I simply don't remember. There were so few senior officers on board: "a boatload of children", Kirk called us at one point. I did a lot of things other people would do ordinarily — fetching and carrying, helping in Sickbay, even making sure the trainees ate dinner.

Kirk got us out from under that attack, but so much damage was done we could only limp on to Regulus and stay out of Khan's way. Power went back and forth from unreliable to almost non-existent, the shields and screens were useless, and we had to keep on just to find out what was going to happen next. We'd jury-rig something together, build up speed, and the damn thing wouldn't hold up. Turbo lifts were out from C deck down. Worst of all, the food machines could only turn out some disgusting kind of porridge. My inventory of Engineering equipment went from complete to nothing in about half a day. Scotty took everything he could and then some. We talked to each other in micro-sentences and polite tones. I know he took the failure of the ship personally, though it was Kirk's fault for trusting the Reliant. Yet, it wasn't Kirk's fault, not really. A "mistake" like that is made every day between ships. No one ever died of it before.

Everything should have ended up just fine, since Kirk is really superior as a tactician. Eventually he pounded Khan to his knees. Anyone else would have surrendered, but Khan couldn't admit he'd been beaten. He set one final weapon on us, destroying himself in the process. He's have got us, too, if it hadn't been for Spock.

I can't write about this well, Tess. It sounds so melodramatic and hurts so much. The warp drive was off the line, and we had about four minutes to get out of range — impossible. Knowing he couldn't survive the radiation, Spock went into the main reactor room and brought the energizer back up to nominal. And I knew nothing about it. That will haunt me forever: Spock died alone in a glass room, and most of us had no idea it was happening. By the time the radiation had dissipated enough so that someone could go in and bring his body out, though, I knew. I was the one

who had to arrange for the coffin, find a federation flag, and set up the details of the funeral. In my three years as Supply Officer I'd never been in charge before and had only helped Faissal once. Few people want a space burial. I spent the whole time snuffling back tears and trying to make things run as smoothly as possible. I owed Spock that, and more that I can never now repay.

Now we are heading to Alpha Ceti V to pick up any survivors from Reliant, the ones Khan marooned, and then will go back to Earth. Things are slowly being put right again, though no one has much heart for the work. There are too many reminders of what we've lost or left behind. Through all this, it is Admiral Kirk who is keeping us together with quiet words to the shaken cadets, encouragement for the lieutenants, and a strong shoulder for the older officers. It's incredible, since Spock's death is sure to have affected him far more than anyone else aboard, but he seems to have gone through his grief and come out again. He's the only one who can say "Spock" without bursting into tears.

Yet the sadness is there. You can sense the loss in his eyes when he looks behind him on the bridge. Or like yesterday, when I was helping Saavik clear Spock's quarters to send his possessions home. Saavik was doing her very best Vulcan bravery routine; I was crying and snuffling into a tissue as I packed the transport container. Kirk saw us through the open door and came in. He kind of worked around him for awhile, sitting on the platform looking at an IDIC wall hanging. Then he kind of gave me a smile and asked if I'd included the framistantor. I couldn't help it — I chuckled and said "I wouldn't have thought you'd remember that, sir." He shrugged. "I remember all my cadets, especially the troublesome ones." Then he rose and put one hand on my shoulder. "Don't grieve, Teri," he said, "just remember." He gave a glance to Saavik and left us alone.

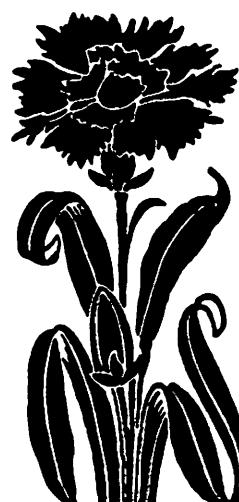
That did help, a little, but after we finished packing Saavik and I sat talking for quite a while. I don't think she's had anyone to unload on and needed the Vulcan equivalent of a good cry. She obviously thinks of Spock sort of like a father, as I think of him as a mentor. Good thing he couldn't see the two of us crying on each other's shoulders.

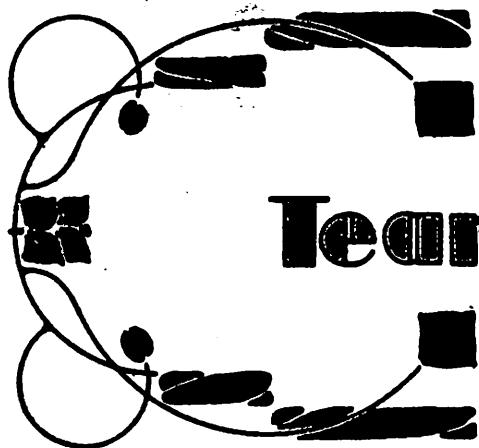
What happens now is anybody's guess. I don't even know if my job as Chief is any good or not. Kirk may decide to fill the position with a lieutenant commander, according to regs, if the rumor is true that he's taking over again as a real commander.

But you still owe me a dinner. See you on Argelius sometime in the next century. Maybe by then I'll feel like eating it.

Love,

Teri





# Tears and Laughter

from: T.O.Q.  
Spacedock  
8245.7

Supply Officer Tessira n'ha Melora  
Starship Endeavor  
Quadrant G Sector XII

Dear Tess,

I am sitting here crying not knowing if my tears are happiness, sadness, or pure frustration. Spock is alive! Can you believe it? My captain is alive, my ship has been destroyed, and I am stuck here in spacedock.

When I wrote to you last, we had left Genesis and started toward Alpha Ceti V to pick up the survivors from Reliant. However, somewhere along the line we diverted back to Earth, (no one ever tells me why we do anything) and someone else got the pickup job. All along the way we kept losing trainees and cadets to other ships and bases, until almost no one was left on board. That was very peculiar. A ship built for a crew of over 500 feels very empty with only a couple dozen crew — the absolute minimum required to operate it normally. Grissom met us at Regulus and took Lt. Saavik and David Marcus back to Genesis as part of a science survey. I wanted to go with them very much, but that jerk Esteban only wanted "real" science officers — I think he'd have tried to leave David behind if Genesis weren't David's project — so just being a science supply officer carried no weight at all. (Speaking of David, had you heard yet that he is Kirk's son? Well, well, well. The things our superiors have up their sleeves. Though when you think about Kirk and Carol, it makes a certain amount of sense even if she does have more brains than Kirk's usual women. Now I'm being catty.)

Still, I found I was really needed on Enterprise. Somebody has to see to food, clothing cleaning, etc, even for a skeleton crew. You should have seen me — running the galley, operating the clothes processors, inventorying anything not destroyed, and all with no help. Every damn one of my trainees got sent off. How they think even Enterprise can run without food and clothing is beyond me. So I kept on doing my little miracles for the few people left, though no one seemed to notice I even existed.

However, it was a good thing there was someone with some old fashioned common sense on this ship. Most of the crew were either biggies — commanders all — or a dozen very junior officers left to slave (with Lt. me stuck in the middle.) There

wasn't anything much to do except worry about Starfleet Command, Spock, and Genesis. After losing everyone at Regulus, Kirk sort of pulled into a shell: very correct, very official, and very far away. Dr. McCoy worried about him at first (as well as being the only person who talked to me) but after awhile he withdrew, too. I wasn't much surprised when he got stranger than anyone and broke into Spock's quarters just before we got back to Earth. Kirk had sealed the door after Saavik and I packed up, but the seal didn't stop McCoy. Kirk had to have him tranquilized and sent to Spacedock hospital.

Then we got the really bad news. They did not intend to repair Enterprise. Did you know they were planning to scuttle her? I had thought she was up for reassignment. No, very wrong. (Better watch out for your own ship. Endeavor is a sister of Enterprise. You're probably next on the list.) Despite Kirk's pleas to be allowed to go back to Genesis, Morrow kept saying no. Finally he told us why. Enterprise was too old and out of date. Letting her be used as a training ship had been a favor to Kirk. Of course, Morrow couldn't wait and let that little bomb drop privately. He slapped Kirk with it at the final inspection. We were all standing there feeling pleased we were getting some extra leave (Scotty had promised Kirk he could be done with a refit in eight weeks, two if he pushed,) and Morrow crushed us all. We would all be reassigned. You should have seen the faces of the senior officers — incredible disbelief and shock.

To shove insult on top of injury, right beside us in Spacedock was the new tub, Excelsior. Tess, have you seen pictures of the new transwarp class ships? She's an ugly old boat. Basically all they've done is redesign the engineering hull to accommodate the new power system and patch it onto the same saucer hull and nacelles. It looks just terrible. (Besides, there's something wrong about her balance. The saucer doesn't look like it's on straight!) When you compare the grace and agility of Enterprise next to that lumbering, bloated bathtub, it's enough to make you sick. And I'm not the only one who thinks so. Scotty can't say anything nice — and he's supposed to be her Captain of Engineering. (What does that title mean?) I wish they'd asked him how to design a truly beautiful ship. He'd put love into the design along with the efficiency.

This probably sounds like sour grapes since I'm not on any ship at the moment, ugly or not. I am stuck here on Spacedock inventorying paperclips and uniforms. Being Chief of Supply for Enterprise sure didn't last long. Sigh. No one here knows what to do with me — a supply chief who's outranked by her junior officers. They can't downgrade me — I don't deserve disciplinary action.

Well, at least they don't know I deserve it, and I sure as hell ain't goin' to tell 'em. (Yes, I know you want to hear the part about why Spock is alive. You've got to wait while I tell it in order.)

After we all trooped dejectedly off Enterprise, we were put in transient quarters, at least the officers. All the remaining kids disappeared on their leaves. I haven't been so alone since I first went up to the Academy, so I went out looking for Uhura to talk to. I couldn't find her or any of the senior officers. I was even willing to sit through dinner with Pavel if he'd talk to me. No good there, either. So I went to bed. Sometime after 2400 hours (or something equally dim) Spacedock got a yellow alert. All the communications were out, crazy channels on the coms when you tried to check in — but I did manage to figure out somebody was stealing the Enterprise. I ran down to one of the lounges (in my nightie) and watched her back out and barge her way out the spacedoors, with Excelsior gunning her engine in frustration (Scotty stole her sparkplugs or something.) I was furious— of course, Kirk had stolen her to go back to Genesis and they went without me. I should have known it and stayed on board. I went back to my room and threw things against the wall for half an hour, dumped them in the recycler, and started over. It cost a lot of credits and didn't even help. Shit, I was mad.

Now the rest of this is confidential — strictly between-you-and-me stuff. If it gets out, I'm coming after you with a processor and you can be somebody's new leisure uniform.

Kirk had made a mistake in leaving Spock's body behind on Genesis. I am told

that an essential part of Vulcan religion is that the body and soul must come at death to Mount Seleya. There is some mystical stuff I can't understand about Spock's spirit remaining there with his ancestors. What Spock had done at the last minute was to put his spirit in transient quarters, courtesy of Dr. McCoy; no wonder the doctor has gone all wonky on us. Kirk had to go back, collect Spock's body, and return everything so the Vulcans could fix it up. Does that sound logical to you? It sounds like a lot of hokum to me. But Uhura swore that Ambassador Sarek thought it was important.

While I was still throwing stuff around my room, Uhura came in. She'd arranged to transport Kirk and company up to Enterprise and had boluxed up the spackdock coms (which figured.) Now she had to get out while the going was good and go to Vulcan with the ambassador. What she needed was a cover. Security would be sure to be after her if they figured it out. What she needed me to do was take over the dimbulb job she'd been doing at the transport station until she could get away. I didn't see how that could work, but she had that fixed, too. The ensign she'd been working with worships her (or is terrified, I can't tell which.) So he isn't going to tell. She fixed the security coder to accept a fake ID she'd given me. So ever since then I've been doing my job all day and her job for second shift. No one seems to have figured it out. I fill the ensign with tales of life on Enterprise and we snooze behind the console. (He calls this station the, er, hind end of space.) Someday I fully expect to get sent to the most remote station in the Federation to count rocks as I break them into gravel. But it's all been worth it, because now I know that Spock is alive.

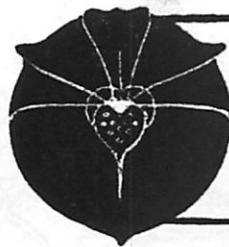
When Kirk got back to Genesis, he was met by Klingons, a planet that had gone wild, and a reborn Spock. I don't know all the details yet, but in the process Enterprise was destroyed (agony for me), David Marcus got killed (agony for Kirk), and Genesis self-destructed. Somehow they all got back to Vulcan with Spock — maybe someday I'll understand just why he was dead or whatever happened — and all that hokum about body and spirit got put to the test. The Vulcans put things right. Uhura sent me a message just now so I could know to stop carrying her shift, but I don't know if things are out of danger as far as their jobs are concerned. Let's face it — by stealing a ship, breaking McCoy out of detention (oh, yeah, I forgot to mention that,) sabotaging Excelsior, losing Enterprise, and utterly wiping out communications at Spacedock for about fifteen hours, they've pretty well ruined themselves with Starfleet Command.

Of course, Kirk is the Miracle Man. He always manages to bring success out of defeat, even when it takes awhile. I'm wondering just how he's going to manage this one. Granted, he does have a Klingon Bird of Prey (when did Klingons start using those? I thought only Romulans had them,) and a new generation cloaking device (ditto for that.) But is that enough to blackmail Nogura and Morrow into letting him have a new ship? I don't think even the pressure the Vulcans can give will manage that.

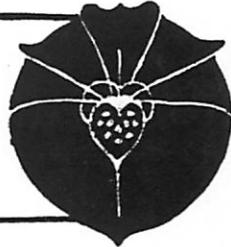
So, there it is. Tears, laughter, and complete frustration. I don't know what's next. I hope I hear something more from Uhura fairly soon, and I've decided to start studying Vulcan. All this spirit business still sounds like nonsense, but if the Vulcans believe it (and it does work) it must be logical. And anyway, there's nothing much else to do in my humble supply room. I only hope that when Kirk gets everything all pulled back together again there will be some room for me, my ensign friend, and all the rest of the loyal hangers-on. I can't believe that even the loss of the Enterprise will hold him up for long.

I am going to go totally wonky myself, waiting. I'll write one way or the other.

Love,  
Teri



## Saavik's Farewell



I was just beginning to understand  
You, love, what humans are.  
You knew only a little more -  
A scientist who rarely looked up from his studies,  
A child who had not yet left the home nest.

It could have been a fabulous journey  
Together learning, growing,  
Understanding.  
We had made a beginning,  
And I still see ahead faint glimpses.  
Love is possible.

I had not believed that once.  
Where I was born there was no love,  
Only hate, cruelty, and despair.  
Compassion and duty - not love - drew me from that.  
For long it was enough.  
But no longer.

Never shall I cease to regret that you were taken so soon.  
You, so open and willing, seeking me  
When I would have ignored you.  
You, being there for me,  
When I needed the strength of another.  
You, showing me where love can lead.

We can not go there together, now  
Hand in hand as we had started.  
Another will gain what might have been yours -  
My heart, my mind, my life.

"David is dead," I told your father.  
So bereft myself I could find no words  
To gentle the blow.  
Now I say them again,  
Seeing all the possibilities that can never be.

Farewell, David.  
Dear one who could have, should have been  
My love.  
Farewell.



Until today  
 I always thought  
 That if something were real,  
 I could touch it,  
 Possess it.  
 Physical awareness gave reality.

Ideas became words,  
 Words on pages in books;  
 Books I could carry,  
 Fold open the pages and see -  
 Leather bound, black ink, smooth paper -  
 The wisdom of the universe,  
 Lined up on a shelf.

Starfleet was life.  
 My career detailed by things:  
 A uniform gave me power,  
 Medals told my accomplishments.  
 My feet walked the decks of a ship,  
 And my hands controlled the universe.  
 Reality in my grasp.

Friends were the easiest.  
 Collected and counted.  
 Men friends, women friends,  
 Drinking buddies,  
 Colleagues.  
 To be with, to see, to touch.  
 Friends when seen,  
 Without existence without contact.

When one came who was different -  
 Untouched  
 Unpossessed  
 Yet closer to me  
 Than any one thing I owned -  
 I did not understand.

Then he died.  
 Separated, he could not touch me,  
 Though he touched another and formed a link,  
 That did not include me.  
 It became my job to break and set aright  
 Two friends:  
 One alive, one not,  
 Yet both in pain  
 That I could not feel.

Today I stand under an alien sun.  
 Not touching, not touched.  
 Yet inextricably bound in a future  
 I can no longer sense.  
 Possessions gone,  
 Career shattered,  
 No ship to cling to,  
 With only these few friends  
 left of the many.

And I do not have to touch him to know.

